

Beatless: Volume 1

Satoshi Hase

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I trust in your smile. I won't care whether you are soulless or not.

Satoshi Hase



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Table of Contents

Cover

Phase1 「Contract」

Phase2 「Analog Hack」

Phase3 「You'll Be Mine」

Phase4 「Automatic World」

Phase5 「Boy Meets Pornography」

Phase6 「My Whereabouts」

Phase7 「Dystopia Game」

Phase8 「Slumber of Human」

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Phase1 「Contract」

When he slept, Arato would always encounter one of two things in his dreams: the first was a nightmare of massive flames, swelling to fill the room. While it seemed the whole world burned around him, he would be swallowed up in a writhing tsunami of red and charcoal black. The other was the image of a dog, wagging its tail and gazing up at him.

Soon after entering elementary school, Arato had been caught up in the flame of an explosion and received burns over his entire body. In the front garden of the hospital, surrounded by silence so deep that he could hear his own heartbeat, he watched people. Those days his father was often busy, and his little sister was still very young, so they only came to visit him every once in a while. To him, these infrequent visits made him feel worthless in the eyes of his family.

In his slumber, even real memories seemed like daydreams. When the pain came, he just needed to push the painkiller button and the world would go silent, as if every wave of sound had been cut away.

One day, a white puppy entered his lonely world. By the time he even noticed its presence, the puppy was already approaching him. It seemed interested in him, and started sniffing at his legs.

“This little guy wants to be your friend, Arato.” He never could remember the face of the young woman in the nurse’s uniform who’d said that to him, but he remembered all the puppy’s adorable traits very well. Like how when he pet its head, it would beg with its forepaw for him to tickle its chin, too. Or the fluffiness of its short, white fur. Or how frantically it would wag its little tail. Or the way it would seem to bounce off the ground when it ran up to him. Or how it would playfully nip at the heel of his shoes, so that, even though it was difficult to move at all, he found he couldn’t help but play along.

“Arato, this boy says he would like to play with you and the puppy, too.” A few days later, the nurse brought a boy the same age as Arato with her.

Arato thought the boy looked very sick, considering how thin his arms and legs were. He didn’t learn until later that the boy couldn’t eat the hospital food and was getting all his nutrients through an IV.

At the time, Arato didn’t know what to do. He shied away from meeting the skeletal boy’s eyes.

But the puppy’s big eyes were shining with excitement. It ran

around in circles with its tongue lolling out, unable to make up its mind about which boy it should play with.

The heart is moved by that which the eye perceives. The human heart can be shaken, even by that which is not human.

Moved by the puppy's antics, Arato looked at the boy's face. The boy had the faint expression of someone lost in darkness; someone unable to cry out for help. He had one hand to his throat, where malnutrition made his sinew stand out to a pitiful degree.

There was the sound of a wet nose snuffling from Arato's feet. The puppy was wagging its tail so hard that its back legs were tottering. To a lonely boy in a lonely world, the sight of another living thing enjoying itself so much was salvation.

"He looks like he's having tons of fun." Arato put his feelings into words, and broke the silence. A warm feeling spread in his chest, and for some reason, he felt like crying.

The puppy was switching back and forth between sniffing at the ground and gazing up at Arato. Watching it, Arato came to the conclusion that, if he decided he was having fun, maybe the world wouldn't feel so lonely.

Though his injuries didn't seem as grave as Arato's, the boy had his lips shut firmly and didn't say a word.

In his painful state, it was a trial even reaching out his hand. But Arato felt he needed to make the first move. "My name's Arato Endo." Arato gathered his courage and took the first step. "Let's be friends."

Sunlight shone through the classroom window.

Arato Endo, draped over a chair in the classroom, let out a groan. "It's only April, why's it so hot..." The sky seemed to stretch on forever. Arato turned his gaze to the ceiling.

"Look at you, sleeping through class like a boss." Ryo Kaidai walked over to stand by Arato during the break. He was a handsome guy with long bangs, and the top button of his uniform shirt undone.

"Hey, you were out like a light too, so you shouldn't talk," someone said from behind them. The voice belonged to Kengo Suguri, whose seat was right behind Arato's. Kengo liked to think of himself as the rational type. But, behind his glasses, his eyes (which were sometimes stubborn and sometimes frail) betrayed his often changing emotions.

"I got all my prep done yesterday," Ryo replied, indifferently. It often struck Arato as odd that Ryo was even going to an ordinary high school like theirs.

"Must be nice, having all those brains and nothing to do with them," Arato said.

Ryo still looked indifferent, but seemed strangely pleased by Arato's words. "Aww, stop. The only reason they have schools around anymore is so we can practice getting along with other people. I think that, in our lifetime, we'll see the day when it won't matter how smart anyone is anymore."

"You rich kids sure have it nice. Even your excuses for slacking off are high-class," Kengo said, transferring the notes he'd taken during class from the school terminal to his own pocket terminal.

Arato saw a notification light blinking on his desk screen, and his shoulders slumped. He pulled out his card-sized pocket terminal to check the notice. The deadline for some new homework was written in red text on his personal scheduler.

"The hell?" he grumbled. "How come I'm the only one who gets extra homework?"

"By my calculations, here in about ten years the only work we men will have left to us is getting friendly with the ladies," Ryo said, spreading both hands as if he was about to bust a move.

Arato felt like half of class 2C — the twenty female students to be exact — were sending icy glares their way. "It's amazing you can say that kind of thing with a straight face in this class, Kaidai."

"What makes you say that?"

"You've hit on every single girl in the class."

"That was my goal for the year," Ryo protested. "A girl a week. I worked pretty hard at it."

Arato and his two friends stood out in class, and not in a good way. It was all Ryo's fault. Ever since they changed classes, the handsome, intelligent Ryo had flirted with every single girl in the class. Due to this, the relationships between the girls had been put in turmoil, until finally they had all come to the consensus that Ryo was the scum of the Earth.

The boys of the class, for their part, didn't want anything to do with a guy the girls were all clearly avoiding. As a result, only his long-time friends Arato and Kengo would even hang out with him.

Sweat beaded on Arato's forehead. "Ryo, you're the one who just said school is for figuring out how to get along, right? One of these days someone's going to teach you how you're actually supposed to get along with others. Painfully, I'd guess."

"Oh, hey. I've got a date with a girl from the next high school over on Sunday. You should come along, Arato," Ryo said, grabbing Arato's arm from behind.

"Nah, I can't. I promised I'd hang out with Yuka..."

"Bull! Yuka's not gonna shake you down when she knows you're running low on allowance."

"Stop pretending you're an expert on my little sister," Arato

retorted.

“You sure love dragging Endo into everything, don’t you, Kaidai?” Kengo said.

At Kengo’s dry observation, Ryo flashed a huge grin. “It’s more fun with Arato around.”

Arato wondered if Ryo was actually so smart that he was wrapping all the way around to stupid again. Of course, this would make Arato and Kengo idiots too, for hanging around him.

The cityscape beyond the classroom window glittered. On the other side of the river, the solar panels in the residential district flashed with reflected sunlight.

It was April, and school had just entered third quarter.

Long ago, Japan had adopted the custom of starting the school year in September, like schools in Europe and America did. By this point, even in Japan people found it strange that, one hundred years ago, the school years had started under blooming cherry blossoms.

The route Arato and his friends took home ran parallel to the Sumida River, which was lined with cherry blossom trees. Passing by the Kototoi bridge, which had collapsed once over the last one hundred years, they slipped by the broken stone monument at the Ushijima Shrine. This path took them under a tunnel of cherry blossom trees, planted on either side of Bokutei Street.

“Hey, are we doing hanami this year or what?” Arato asked, referring to the Japanese custom of picnicking with friends under the cherry blossoms during their blooming season. He had stopped beside a relatively new stone monument, which had been built on the bank of the Sumidagawa River. Forty-two years ago, there had been a massive disaster people called the ‘Hazard.’ The monument had been put up to remind everyone of the disaster, which had reduced the Honjo Azumabashi district to a pile of rubble. Old folks often came and laid flowers at the monument. AR photos had been provided for the monument, and they started displaying as soon as Arato and the others got close enough.

In the heat of early April, Ryo stripped off his school jacket. “Let’s have a hanami this Sunday,” he said.

“Man, you never give up, do you? How many people did you already invite?” Arato asked, turning a small dial in the collar of his uniform. Electricity flowed into the coolant elements in the armpit of his suit, which started to cool off.

With a sly smile, Ryo held up four fingers. “Four ladies.”

“Well you’d better apologize to one of them, then,” Arato told him. “With me, you, and Kengo that’s only three guys.”

“Arato,” Ryo complained, “that makes it sound like you two are the only friends I have.”

“We are.”

“Oh come on, I have other friends. You’re gonna make me cry, here.”

Over the last fifty years, there had been some major land adjustments around the old Sumida District Office. With the Azuma and Komagata bridges as starting points, the streets of the district had been rerouted into a more regular grid.

The flow of cars down the wide roads was smooth as a river. Every vehicle had self-driving functions now, so traffic jams were a thing of the past.

When Arato and the others arrived at an intersection, they saw an old lady trying to cross the four lane road. A girl in a yellow jersey came up next to the old woman and took her by the hand.

Arato’s body moved without hesitation. “I’m gonna go help,” he said. The stoplight looked like it was just about to change, and he doubted the girl and old lady were going to make it in time.

“That girl isn’t a human, you know,” Kengo said, in an uninterested tone. There was nothing about the girl’s appearance or actions to show that she was anything other than human, but Kengo was very knowledgeable about computers and machines.

“If you get in the way when an interface is doing its job,” he went on, “all you’re gonna do is put a load on their processor.”

‘Interface’ was the short slang for hIEs — humanoid Interface Elements. Basically robots with human forms, hIEs could do just about anything a human could. Thanks to this, there was no such thing as a labor shortage anymore, and the world had become quite convenient.

“Fine, but I’m still going to help,” Arato said, then headed over to the crosswalk.

When the girl android saw him approach, she smiled at him.

“Here, I’ll help.”

“Thank you.” The old woman, bent with age, thanked him with a smile that crinkled her whole face.

Humans can’t convey their feelings directly to one another, so we show our feelings through our actions. But by this point, there were things other than humans that could perform those same meaningful actions; this was the reality Arato and the others lived in. In the year 2105, androids had filled all the holes in society.

The others ragged on Arato when he walked back from the crosswalk.

“One of these days someone’s gonna really take advantage of you, you know.”

They were walking through the area around the Honjo Azumabashi Subway Station, which had grown into a proper downtown. The place was a hodgepodge of old buildings from before

the Hazard, and newer buildings, whose building materials gave them a completely different texture.

“Hey, gotta be nice to girls, right?” said Arato, defending himself. “Why don’t you guys lend a hand next time?”

The area was full of hIEs, if you looked hard enough. They had been a welcome addition to the service industry, which had been short-staffed since the dawn of time, and they were especially common in restaurants.

Kengo was local, so he knew everything there was to know about the area. “Did you know that girl at the taiyaki stand is an hIE?” he asked. Across the intersection with Asakusa Street, a girl with pretty blonde curls was turning over the baking form at a takoyaki stand.

“There’s one working at that soba shop, too,” he pointed out. “And there’s some running the registers over at Sky Tree. Anytime an hIE sees someone old, they run over and help.”

“Hey, they’re working hard,” Arato said. As he passed by the takoyaki stand, he gave the girl a good look. She smiled and asked, “Would you like some takoyaki?” She wasn’t sweating.

Ryo’s eyes were cold when he looked at her, completely different from how he gazed at the girls in their class. “No, they aren’t. Arato, you’re the kind of guy who thinks if you cheer on a motor it’ll go faster, aren’t you?”

“I’m free to think whatever I want,” Arato said.

“You’re living in a fairy tale,” Ryo scoffed.

“I’d say fairy tale land has had a scientific revolution.”

“That’s what I call progress. Even unscientific plebs like you spend every day surrounded by science.”

Their friendly chat continued to fly off the rails.

Just then, Arato saw something out of the corner of his eye; something that should not have been there. Someone’s outdoor black cat was dragging something out of the alley, where a power-assist delivery bike was parked by the soba shop. Now and then, the cat would stop to bite at the thing, which was almost as big as the cat was, before going back to dragging it along laboriously.

The thing being dragged was nightmarishly out of place under the bright midday sun. It was a human arm.

“Oh shit. Ohhhh shit,” Arato said, feeling the blood drain instantly from his face.

It was a right arm with smooth, white skin. The cat ran away, and a chunk of skin that the cat had been nibbling on rolled away from the elbow.

Arato felt his legs give out.

Kengo, who was just passing by Arato, casually caught his arm to hold him up. “What, again?” he asked, then went and grabbed the

arm, giving it a shake. A white tube was jutting out from the severed portion, and a blood-like liquid pattered onto the ground.

“Somebody’s been going around busting up hIEs lately,” he said. “I’ve seen scrap from a few bodies here and there. What a waste.”

“‘What a waste?’” Arato echoed incredulously. “Don’t you feel sorry for them?” He couldn’t stop the hammering of his heart, or see the white arm as anything other than that of a young girl. There was no way he could be calm, staring at a severed human body part, even if it hadn’t come from a human.

“Hey,” Kengo replied, “when someone turns something that costs about the same as a car into scrap, I think it’s a waste.”

Arato reached out to touch the severed arm, but Ryo caught his shoulder to stop him.

“Don’t touch it. We don’t even know what those things are made of.”

“We can’t just throw the thing in the trash,” Arato said. The android girl who had helped the old lady cross the street was walking nearby. It was painful to think that the owner of the severed arm could be a kind girl, just like her.

“Don’t get the wrong idea about them, Arato,” Ryo said. His voice was blunt, as he looked down at the severed limb. “The hIEs only do stuff for us because that’s what they’re programmed to do. Some marketing guys figured out that they’d sell well if they looked like humans and acted all nice. It’s just brand propaganda.”

“That’s just a piece of a machine,” Kengo agreed. Though they were in the middle of a downtown area, with Kengo holding what looked like a severed human arm, few people spared them a second glance.

Arato’s friends weren’t particularly fond of hIEs. Among the people passing by, some just frowned, though some showed a little pity in their eyes. Still, if the ‘girl’ the arm belonged to had been human, everyone would be reacting much differently.

Even Arato’s sense of danger had cooled off after he realized the severed arm wasn’t the sign of a murder. Despite that, the thought of walking away from what looked like a piece of a human body weighed too heavily on Arato’s mind.

“Let’s take it to the police,” he said. “I’d feel bad if we just threw it away.”

That night, an incident occurred in one corner of the No. 2 Tokyo Bay Landfill Island Group.

From the base of one of the buildings in a sprawling research area, a sharp explosion echoed in the night, accompanied by a rumbling in

the surrounding earth. Immediately afterward, black smoke roiled like an inverted avalanche out of the building's ground floor entrance.

The windows of the building, which stood at fifty meters tall with fifteen floors, began to shatter, one after another. Silent vibrations shook the black fiber walls.

Every light in the building went out. This was the moment in which the employees of Tokyo Research Lab of MemeFrame Co. — who were big players in the hIE behavior control sector — died.

10:08 PM. A large transport helicopter approached the No. 2 Landfill Island Group from the sea side. The scramble order had come the instant the first explosion had rang out. HOO (Hands Of Operation), the PMC hired by MemeFrame for security, were moving in to take control of the situation.

The helicopter, which had taken off from the heliport at Funabashi, Chiba Prefecture, was hauling a massive container.

The pilot, wearing a helmet with a HMD, turned to Sest. “The Japan-stationed US Army and Japanese Army have authorized us for twenty minutes of fly time,” he said. “That’s all the time we’ve got here in the Tokyo airspace. Don’t forget.”

Sest Ackerman was massaging the back of his muscular neck. The helicopter, which was normally used for transporting troops, had been converted into a drone control center. Having served as an elite among America’s Green Berets, it was the kind of workspace that made Sest feel cramped.

“All right Ackerman Squad, let’s review the mission before we get started,” Sest announced. “Our objective is the capture or destruction of the five hIEs that escaped during the explosion at the lab. All lab personnel have already evacuated to their shelters.”

As a mission objective, it was extremely odd.

The whole idea of hIEs ‘escaping’ was patently ridiculous. hIEs looked like humans, but their every move was controlled externally. Every action was optimal, selected from a specialized program and expansive sampling of behaviors accessed through a central network. In other words, hIEs were nothing more than puppets, dancing on the invisible strings of wireless network signals.

MemeFrame was a mega-corporation that controlled the hIE behavior management cloud, meaning that Sest and his team were on a mission equivalent to a puppeteer saying, “My puppets have run away, go and catch them.”

The helicopter rotors were quiet. Silent enough, in fact, that even in the quiet of the night it would be hard to make out the sound as the helicopter maintained its height and wove through the darkness.

The scramble team rushing to the scene was comprised of three men: the helicopter pilot, Sergeant Thomas Lieu; an operator, Sergeant

Major Youseff Malai; and Sest, their captain. None of them commented on the strangeness of their mission. They were professionals.

Using the transmitter implant in his skull, Sest contacted the HOO tactical command center through a datalink. "Major," he said, "we've arrived at the target area. Beginning sensor sweeps for the enemy."

Using the helicopter's thermal sensor, they confirmed five human-sized heat signatures. The signatures were heading away from the central research building of the MemeFrame Tokyo Research Lab, toward the No. 1 Landfill Island Group.

HOO used an AI in the command center to formulate tactical strategies for their combat units. At that moment it was providing a tactical prediction. The AI's suggestion was to allow the hIEs to cross the bridge to Odaiba's residential district.

It wanted them to conduct urban combat in a residential area.

Sest folded his well-toned arms. "That's nuts," he grumbled. It was a plan usually held back as a last resort when intercepting unmanned combat units, because computer-controlled weapons could not decide for themselves to attack a human being. In those situations, the machines were simply tools that had to wait for their owner's permission before acting. In other words, the AI was instructing them to take advantage of the reduced freedom experienced by unmanned combat units that carelessly entered highly populated areas.

The image of the top half of a woman wearing a military cap slipped into Sest's retinal display.

〈 We need to reduce the sensitivity of the command center AI, 〉 she announced. 〈 The client has assessed the threat level of this mission as fairly high. That's why they requested an emergency scramble from us. But, I don't think they actually want an all-out war in a residential area. 〉

Major Collidenne Lemaire was a calm commander in her forties. Sest hadn't the faintest idea of her military background.

"What should we do about the AI's strategy, Major?" he asked. Sest's confidence wasn't shaken in the face of complications; he was a veteran. He had enlisted in the army at eighteen and served for sixteen years. The guns he used had gotten bigger, and his rank had gone up to Second Lieutenant, but he always stayed the same strong and loyal soldier.

〈 I'm authorizing you to reject the proposal, 〉 she told him.

〈 The police are forming a blockade on the bridge with their cars, so it wouldn't be realistic to try and chase the targets into the residential district. 〉

It wasn't that the major was a humanitarian; she just wanted to avoid engaging the targets on a bridge. "Combat drones were useless

underwater,” she would have said. “The light and radio waves of the wireless signals used to control them wouldn’t reach.” For an emergency land combat team that relied on drones, this meant that any target that fell into the water would be out of their reach.

“What’s plan B, major?” Sest wanted to know.

⟨ The No. 2 Landfill Island Group mainly contains academic and research buildings. It’s practically deserted at night. We’ll take down the targets before they leave the area. The client has received authorization from the government to utilize heavy weapons. There won’t be any caps on our firepower. ⟩

The list of approved weapons that got sent around was overkill, considering they were just capturing five hIEs. Japan was no longer allergic to the military like it had been one hundred years ago. But the kind of firepower the client was authorizing was insane, especially given that they would be fighting within spitting distance of a residential area. The equipment list didn’t match up with the details of the mission, which meant that their intel was incomplete.

Sest felt a sharp sting of tension run up the back of his neck. “Youssef, can you give me the intel from the client again?”

Youssef, the team’s French-African operator, tapped his console’s keys with bony, flexible fingers. “All the escaped hIEs are female models,” he said. “Each has specialized equipment. That’s all we’ve got so far, if you can call that ‘intel.’ If this was all the info it took to win wars, I doubt anyone since the dawn of time would have lost a battle due to lack of data.”

Sest checked the countdown timer on his retinal display. It had already been five minutes since their helicopter had entered Tokyo airspace. “Put down the container,” he ordered. “While we get the ground unit up and running, I’m sure the major will be negotiating for some more information.”

The research park had few residential buildings and wide, straight roads that were currently devoid of life. At the client’s request, even ambulances and fire trucks were being prevented from approaching the area.

The pilot aimed the helicopter for a lonely street, illuminated with pools of white light from the streetlamps, and dropped the container from about twenty meters up. There was an explosive burst of gas from underneath as the container, which was about the size of two standard international shipping containers, came to land.

Inside the container were two squads of combat drones. Each combat squad in the PMC was comprised of eleven units, same as a standard squad in the US Army. So, between the two squads in the container there were twenty-two drones, each equipped with military-grade armaments. Between them, they could easily turn a little area

like Odaiba into a sea of flames.

At a request from the container's AI, the helicopter automatically dropped a sensor unit. Sixty-four disposable camera units flew out from the central mother unit and began to swarm around like flying insects, gathering images of the area.

Sixty-four palm-sized screens opened up on the 3D display in the command center. No humans were picked up on any of the screens, so the operations area 'all clear' notification lit up on the screen.

The No. 2 Landfill Island Group used to be known as the 'Central Breakwater Outer Landfill Site.' It had been the first place the rubble from the Hazard, which had taken place forty-two years ago, had been sent. That fact had given it a bad reputation, so no one wanted to use it as a residential area. It was well suited for combat.

Five forms were picked out by the image recognition filter. A zoomed-in image slid into the middle of the display.

"Our sensors have the targets," Sest, who had participated in countless military operations, announced. What he saw out there, running through the night-darkened research park, were five lights of different colors, and five girls, each one like a work of art. For a moment, he forgot that he was currently on a battlefield, in combat.

"The 'special equipment' the intel mentioned must be these things," Youssef said, zooming in on the image. The hIEs were each in a suit lit by a different color; red, green, yellow, orange, and one that was bright white. Each of them also carried some kind of large, strange tool.

The HOO combat drones commenced their mission, spreading out from their cubic container. Sest watched their movements through the screen. The two-meter long drones used the terrain of the wide road to conceal themselves. Wheeled heavy artillery drones lurked behind a vanguard of humanoid drones, waiting for their hunt to begin. The frontmost line was made up of floating, mobile smart-mines.

The PMC's behavioral cloud moved all its puppets smoothly. Unlike the hIEs, which were built to endear themselves to humans, the military drones had been designed to harm them. But the basic concept of their behavioral patterns was the same; they were to select the optimal behavior to complete the objectives they had been given.

"Advance the vanguard to seventy meters from the targets, then engage with two rounds of smart mines," Sest commanded. "Then I want the tank drones to lay down concentrated fire, starting with the unit closest to the targets. The vanguard will hold the line, and the rear guard will react to the targets' movements."

Sest was a soldier, born and raised. The battlefield was his home. The behavior cloud interpreted his instructions, and maneuvered his drone squad. The drones approached their targets, gathering

information as they moved.

Then it happened.

One of the hIEs, a young girl with her red hair tied back in twin tails, looked directly into one of the cameras and flashed a dazzling smile. Then she started running. The helicopter was running dark and silent, with its lights out and optical camouflage on, but she headed straight for it.

Goosebumps ran up Sest's muscular arm. His instincts screamed at him to not let her get close. "Thomas! Get the heli away from that red kid. All units, don't let her take a single step past the defensive line!"

In a single instant, the scene erupted in combat. The drones that made up the defensive line opened fire ferociously on the hIE girls. Gunshots split the night, while muzzle flashes lit up the air like fireworks.

Youssef quietly tapped at his keyboard. No matter what happened, staying as calm as a machine was a vital skill any soldier needed to survive these days.

The pilot, Thomas, tried to make his voice light to cover his anxiety. "Well wouldja look at that, boss? Our targets are shrugging off .50 caliber rounds."

The machine guns mounted on the wheeled drones poured bullets at the hIEs like hoses spraying water. The red-haired girl used a giant blade to shield herself from the barrage; bathing in a storm of a thousand bullets a second, any one of which could have easily pierced 5mm thick steel plate, the little lady hIE was completely unshaken. .50 caliber rounds were fairly standard for military use, but even combat hIEs generally didn't have the defensive power to withstand them so easily.

"First squad, units 01 to 03, look for an opening in the red one's defenses to snipe her body," Sest ordered. "All remaining units, get those four other hIEs pinned down."

Fiery explosions from the activated mobile mines swirled and spread like flowers. The smart mines were key support units in drone combat; their explosive power could tear through the armor of anything but the heaviest Main Battle Tank (MBT) units. The images from the thermal sensors were blotted out with white heat readings.

But the sound of sniper fire never came. An alert sounded, and a notice flashed onto the screen. All of the armed drones equipped with 40mm automatic grenade launchers — which formed the final line of defense in front of the drone container — had shorted out and shut down.

Sest's team had lost all their biggest guns in a single instant. "Get them back online," he urged.

"I can't even tell what hit them," Youssef said, his fingers stopping

on the keys. He felt as though the air had grown viscous. Even when running in the depths of the Amazon, you would never see every single wheeled drone in a squad shut down at the same time.

“Get the tactical AI on it,” Sest ordered him. “We just got hit by an enemy attack. Have it analyze the enemy’s weapon.”

But the AI, which based its combat directions off the records of a wide array of past battles, simply gave them a 〈Judgment Pending〉 notice and went silent. Even Sest drew in a sharp breath at the abnormality of the situation.

Thomas, the pilot, turned to them from the cockpit. “Flowers, boss! MemeFrame’s got its girls using flowers,” he said with a whistle.

At his comrade’s light comment, Sest returned to himself. His eyes searched the screen for danger, as if to reclaim the few seconds he’d lost in hesitation while reacting to the strangeness of their situation. Flowers of all colors were blooming on the road, which was paved with recycled materials.

The hIE girl with red hair, who had been pinned down by the machine guns of the wheeled drones, was free. Her weapon, a blade larger than herself, shone vividly crimson.

Sest tried to predict her next movement. What would he do, in her position?

She was undamaged, despite having stood in the heart of the smart mine explosions. Having shown them her inconceivable defensive power, she smiled. Apparently she was enjoying this quite a lot.

“She’s coming for the container!” Sest yelled, at the same instant the red light made a beeline for the container.

A thin line of light cut its way through the night. It pierced through the center of the container, then vanished. The landing container, built to withstand shots from MBTs, distorted with heat before a massive hole opened in one side.

In the helicopter, over twenty warnings flashed across the operations screen. The landing container doubled as a relay station that transmitted vast amounts of battle data. Feeling the performance of their puppet strings failing, the drones raised alerts about the abnormality.

Just then, right as they had received a decisive blow, the tactical AI came back with a response: 〈There is a high probability that the short was caused by electricity from the high voltage wires underground, used by the laboratories, flowing into the drones.〉

The high voltage wires of the landfill island were kept in a common trench over ten meters underground. The targets not only knew this, but also had the ability to pull the wires from ten meters underground and use them to attack.

A contact came in from Major Lemaire. Her expression was neutral, but Sest knew she had used the damage taken by his unit as a bargaining chip with the clients to the best of her ability.

〈The client has disclosed further information,〉 she told them.

〈Don't try to get them all. First, take down whichever seems easiest.〉

Data appeared, printed across the 3D screen.

“Youssef, read it. I can't take my eyes off the battle.” To Sest, the fight below had mostly been decided, but he didn't have the authority to order a retreat himself. He requested authorization for a retreat on a confidential line.

The answer was ‘no.’

He ordered the drones to fall back and re-establish their line.

The new intel from the client, summarized by Youssef, began to print across Sest's retinal display:

〈Class Lacia humanoid Interface Elements. Information on their intended use is blank. They're equipped with devices loaded with quantum computers. They can make advanced decisions on their own without relying on a network.〉

A caption appeared on the screen showing the red-haired hIE that had blown away the landing container.

〈Type-001 Code: “Kouka”〉

The hIE girl “Kouka” swung her weapon around, something between a giant blade and a large cannon, her excited smile illuminated by the firelight.

〈Type-002 Code: “Snowdrop”〉

A girl in a white dress, who looked even more childish than the others, had sat her butt down demurely on a pile of scrap that had once been humanoid combat drones. Her dress was decorated with luminous green accessories, and all around her, flowers from every season were blooming in an abundance that was completely unthinkable for the location.

〈Type-003 Code: “Saturnus”〉

A girl with disheveled flaxen hair had stabbed something that looked like a spinning wheel into the ground, and was turning some kind of lever on it.

〈Type-004 Code: “__”〉

There was a shadow, moving too quickly for the realtime video to capture it. All that could be seen were dancing lines of radiance, drawn by the hIE's shining orange lights. Humanoid drones around the shadow didn't even have time to react before they were shattered like fine china.

〈Type-005 Code: “Lacia”〉

The final hIE looked like a girl about to enter the time of her life

when she would be the most beautiful. The expression on her face was straight and pure. She was lifting something that looked like a black coffin in her delicate hands, and using it to deflect incoming bullets with no sign of effort. Cracks ran down the length of the coffin, and it released an explosion of pale blue light.

In that instant, the control center screen was disconnected. At the same time, the tactical control system went down as well. The helicopter was kicked out of silent flight mode, and air turbulence shook the vehicle. The sound of the rotors, which were no longer being controlled by AI, echoed in the night sky, sounding like a giant electric mixer in the air.

Sest grabbed onto a nearby machine to prevent himself from falling within the suddenly stalled helicopter.

“The HMD’s dead!” Thomas, the pilot, swore as he tore off his HMD-equipped helmet with one hand.

Then the stalled vehicle entered a freefall. Luckily, the feeling of falling only lasted for a second. Sest had to cling to the equipment to keep from being thrown to the floor as the auto-recovery system jolted the vehicle back into equilibrium.

“Youssef, get our network back online,” he said. “What’s happening out there?”

When the 3D screen flickered back to life, they were no longer looking at a battlefield; all surveillance video of the battle had been blocked.

“Something jumped our connection with MemeFrame and crashed our system,” Youssef reported. “I’m not getting responses to my queries.”

“Electronic warfare? Shit,” Sest swore.

To a drone unit utilizing advanced tactical commands, wireless signals were vital lifelines. If these ‘girls’ were able to break military encryption and hack the team’s system, they were a whole new breed of monster.

The girls were no longer anywhere to be seen. The HOO tactical AI informed Sest and his team that all hIEs had jumped into the sea.

It was the worst case scenario Sest had been afraid of — normal drones wouldn’t be able to function underwater, where wireless signals couldn’t reach them. But the five target hIEs were able to make advanced decisions on their own, without relying on a network.

Which was exactly why they had chosen the sea as a perfect means of escape. With Tokyo close by, and Japan completely surrounded by water, the thought of trying to pin down the hIEs again was completely hopeless.

Thomas let out a dry laugh.

Youssef’s fingers were still.

There were still ten minutes left on their permit to fly in Tokyo airspace. With no marine scanning equipment in the helicopter, Sest could do nothing but stare down at the face of the sea, an endless pool of darkness itself under the night sky.

“What the hell did we just let loose?” he questioned.

The hIEs they had just encountered were stronger and stranger than Sest ever could have imagined. When the implications of what had just happened started to sink in, Sest broke out in a cold sweat, something he hadn’t done since being a green recruit.

As a veteran, he had often come face-to-face with the evolution of weapons technology; humans were always happy to climb right over walls once thought insurmountable. To bring about change, all it took was someone deciding that a wall was worth climbing over. Take, for example, the invention of the atomic bomb: there are many famously pithy quotes from the scientists of the day about it, but the reality was that many people were quite happy with its completion and the end it brought to the war. They were happy because the atomic bomb had fulfilled its purpose, which was to protect the lives of their soldiers and countrymen.

Five hIEs, each a work of art. Sest glared down at the sea where they had escaped, then he turned an unsettled gaze to the evening cityscape where millions more hIEs were currently in operation. A sudden shiver ran down his spine at the thought that, at that very moment, humanity was climbing over yet another wall. He had no idea what the units that had escaped were capable of, or even what they were created to do.

The fault lay squarely on the shoulders of the client: MemeFrame. They had refused to disclose the information they had, and their initial response had been wrong. But that wasn’t even worth worrying about now. One of the five had ‘equipment’ that easily surpassed the power of a tank. So what about the equipment of the other four hIEs; did they have poison gas, or weaponized viruses? One of them could have a weapon worse than a nuclear bomb.

Sest and his team may have just witnessed the beginning of a disaster that would shake human society to the core.

10:30 PM.

Arato Endo was lecturing his little sister. While he’d been trying to get things ready for dinner, Yuka, the little sister in question, had been gobbling down the ingredients intended for their meal.

“Is your brain working properly?” he scolded. “You couldn’t even leave me enough to cook with?”

It was just Arato and Yuka in the Endo household. Their dad was

busy with work and almost never came home, and their mom had passed away while they were still small. So, Arato had dedicated himself to raising his little sister. Unfortunately, he may have overdone it, as she was now hopelessly spoiled.

“What were you thinking,” he moaned, “when I was right here, trying to make dinner for you?”

“I was thinking, ‘Yay, meat!’” Yuka squealed happily.

“You belong in a zoo,” Arato told her.

“Well, dinner was taking too long,” Yuka whined, flipping the channel on the TV away from the game she had been playing. She was fourteen, three years younger than Arato, but she still had the happy-go-lucky personality of a younger child.

A news program came up on screen.

“Woah, cool,” she exclaimed. “Something blew up.”

On the 3D screen rising from the floor of the dining room, great tongues of flame were bursting from a burning building. It was an image from just 30 minutes ago.

“‘The No. 2 Tokyo Bay Landfill Island Group’... That’s kinda close,” Yuka worried. “Or, wait, isn’t it kinda far?”

“It’s close, ya dummy,” Arato scoffed at her. “Well, if you go in a straight line, at least.”

Grabbing the remote, he called up the guide function and asked it the question. It analyzed his spoken request and replied. According to the guide, the incident had happened fifteen kilometers from the Endos’ apartment.

“Hey, that’s pretty close,” Arato said, feeling unsettled. “Crazy.”

The sound of an explosion rang out from the 3D display.

“Wonder if they’ll close school tomorrow,” Yuka mused.

“Of course they’re not gonna do that.”

“Yeah, guess you’re right,” she agreed. “I hope no one around there got hurt or anything.”

Yuka may not have been good at studying, but she had a kind heart, and that wasn’t just Arato’s bias as her brother. She settled down cross-legged to watch the news, while Arato went back to the kitchen to restart dinner.

Dinner didn’t actually require much cooking; it was a simple matter of pouring the frozen food pack and spice pack in together, and then frying them in some oil. That evening, Yuka had ruined his plans by scarfing down the fried sweet and sour pork, so instead he decided to just pour it all over some carbs and call it good.

“They’re saying it was an hIE robot company,” Yuka commented. “Arato, go get a job so we can buy one of those. We could have it cook for us and stuff.”

“Crap, outta rice,” he said. “Guess we’re having fried udon

tonight.”

“What?! No way, we are NOT having fried udon two days in a row,” she whined. “C’mon, do rice instead.”

“Well,” he said, “we don’t have any rice, so one of us will need to go buy some.”

Yuka bounced off the couch and turned to face him. If human strength came from enjoying eating and playing, she would be a superwoman.

“Arato, will you buy some ice cream for me too?” Truly a fearful specimen of youngest child, she showed no hesitation while making her spoiled request.

“Why is it automatically me who’s going?” Arato asked.

At his question, Yuka gave him a brilliant, innocent smile. “Cuz I wuv you,” she said cutely.

“Words can’t convey how little I care,” he sighed. Despite the season, it was still cold outside at night, so Arato grabbed his heating jacket from where he had it draped in the entryway.

“So you’re gonna go?”

Arato had already come up with an excuse, just so Yuka didn’t think her cutesy act had worked on him. “Well, there’s stuff blowing up tonight,” he said, “so I figured it wasn’t safe for a girl to be out there alone.”

Yuka put her hands together like she was praying. “Please let there be some more explosions tomorrow. Amen.”

“I feel like this is going to turn into one of those ‘be careful what you wish for’ things,” Arato remarked. That said, he still thought that his sister was a cute kid. She saw him off with an expression that said she’d rather have just stayed on the couch, and Arato headed out into the night.

The feeling of being dear to someone, of being accepted, was one that made Arato very happy, which was why he wanted his little sister to be able to feel that way. Though, it could also be said that he’d just gone all in on spoiling her.

Shin Koiwa, the neighborhood where the two of them lived, had been built as part of a Tokyo Bay restoration project. It was constructed near a transfer station set up to connect railway lines from the bay to the land side. From the transfer station, one could get to the Endos’ apartment by heading south on the Urayasu subway line; their residential district was conveniently located for easy access. Further south, toward the bay, there was an area heavily impacted by the Hazard. But Shin Koiwa was a comfortably normal residential district. Many of its residents lived there specifically to get away from life at the heart of the metropolis, so at that time of night there was hardly anyone on the street.

“But seriously, an explosion?” Arato worried to himself. “Are we really gonna be all right?” The danger he’d used as an excuse for Yuka lingered in his mind. Off in the distance, he thought he could hear a siren.

The No. 2 Landfill Island Group was one of the areas where his dad used to work.

It was about a ten minute walk to the grocery store. He didn’t want to spend the whole walk worrying, so he took out his mobile terminal to listen to some music.

“Oh, out running some errands?” a middle-aged woman asked, as Arato walked past her. The slightly plump woman, who looked to be in her late forties, was actually an hIE named Marie who worked for a local landlord. She had been running for over ten years, which was old, for a machine. Arato had seen her face around all the time since he was a kid.

“Yep,” he replied. “You too, Marie?”

“That’s right. We managed to run out of food, too.”

The night walk suddenly felt a little more enjoyable. With someone to talk to, the trip to the store seemed quick. At the little store, run by a single hIE, Arato picked up the same frozen rice and ice cream as always.

Then he headed toward home, walking alongside the road where autonomous cars had eliminated the need for most traffic signals. Marie, shopping bag dangling from one arm, walked alongside him with a gentle gait.

Then, Arato saw them: flowers, falling everywhere.

“Woah,” he wondered, “what the heck?”

Flowers of five colors were raining down. No, perhaps it would be better to say that they were falling all around like snowflakes. Since it was April, Arato first thought they were cherry blossoms. But, when he caught one in his hand, he saw it had long, thin petals like a chrysanthemum. It also felt strangely dry in his hand. The sight was so odd that, even though it was very pretty, Arato felt uneasy.

“Oh my, how lovely. I wonder what’s going on?” Marie, apparently judging that the falling flowers weren’t dangerous, raised her voice in excitement and kept walking down the street.

The neighborhood hIE left Arato behind and continued on, not bothering to brush off the flowers that settled in her hair. Arato just watched as her calmly walking figure grew smaller in the distance down the dark road. Then, he brushed the flowers off of his own head and went after her.

When he caught up to her, Arato saw that Marie had paused unnaturally mid-step. Her well-rounded figure was completely still, as if she had been frozen in ice. He was about to call out to her, but a

sudden, intense feeling of wrongness stopped him.

Marie's knee was stretched out in a random way, like she had forgotten how to take normal steps. Her whole body was trembling violently, as if she was about to burst apart at the seams. Then, her loose, medium-cut hair swished, and her neck creaked in protest as her head spun around 180 degrees.

The hIE's face was expressionless as the shopping bag slipped from her fingers. With her joints still frozen tightly in place, Marie fell to the ground like a doll with a dull thud.

The hyperpigmented flowers continued to fall.

Arato felt something touching his neck. Reflexively, he grabbed at whatever it was, and held the thing in his hand under the light of the streetlamps. It was a colorful flower petal that had sprouted legs like a centipede.

The petal bug started walking around on Arato's hand, and he screamed. He flailed his arm like a madman to get it off before it could crawl up his sleeve. It was late, but he didn't have the presence of mind to keep his voice down.

"What the hell?!" he yelled in panic. "What the hell is that?!" The five-colored petals that now paved the ground were all crawling around like insects. Arato's common sense told him to reject the reality before his eyes, because it was impossible. Reality itself had become a fairy tale.

Arato couldn't believe what was happening; his mind was on the brink of complete chaos. He was worried about Marie. The fact that she was an hIE, not a human, sprang to mind. But he couldn't just leave her there; she looked too human for that.

Strong light suddenly shone on him from the side as he stood there, dazed. A sedan that had been parked nearby suddenly roared to life, its wheels squealing on the pavement. As it came straight for him, he threw himself to the road to avoid it. His arm landed at an odd angle, and a sharp pain shot through his shoulder.

As he went to stand, the ice cream he'd bought for Yuka rolled out of the shopping bag. Reflexively, he grabbed it and returned it to the bag. Then he put his hand on the wall of a nearby house to stand.

The car, which Arato had thought would keep going, instead shifted into reverse and came straight for him. He tried to dodge again, but didn't make it. A powerful blow struck him at waist level.

In that moment, he got a quick look at the interior of the car. Where the driver should have been, there were just flowers of every color, blooming like a giant bouquet.

Arato couldn't wrap his mind around what was happening. He simply slid into a narrow alley to get away from the car. "What the hell is going on... This, this is..."

Looking up, he watched as the falling flowers continue to blot out the night sky.

It was such an impossible sight, but his senses were so keenly aware of the reality around him that Arato started to doubt his own sanity. It was as if the whole world was suddenly out to get him; as if everything he had accepted as reality had been revealed as an illusion. Only his pain and fear were real. His mind could do nothing but rail against the threats to his life that were all around him.

Frozen food was moving out of Marie's shopping bag; the frozen packs had flowers with bunched petals blooming from them. The petals made a dry scratching at the ground as they sprouted legs.

A dark shadow stretched out under the lamplight. Footsteps approached from behind, each step painfully loud in his ears. Arato's eyes were on the ground, and his breath was coming in ragged gasps. The shadow was wearing the same clothing as Marie. Whatever the flowers bloomed on became a monster; a monster out for human blood.

Headlights flooded into the alley that Arato had ducked into from the opposite side, followed by a whole car. The vehicle was out of control, rending its body as it scraped along the narrow alley toward him before it came to a stop, with white smoke pouring out of its underside. Countless flowers bloomed from its chassis.

Arato wished this was a nightmare, from which he just needed to wake up. But this was reality, which made it all the worse. His mind was stuck in an endless loop: *make it stop, please just make it stop*, he thought, fear rooting him to the spot.

Finally, he managed to get his body to move. Wiping the cold sweat from his brow, he tried to retreat from the danger all around him. But before he could get very far, the car that had just charged into the alley after him violently burst into fire. Arato froze on the spot again, his vision filled by a whirlpool of red flame. It was the same scene he had seen in his nightmares night after night. He knew, without a doubt, that he was about to die. So he screamed. He screamed like he hadn't since he was a child. "Help me!"

A human figure appeared in Arato's view.

The figure was facing away, but he could tell that the person was female. She appeared between Arato and the fire, seeming to melt right out of the heat haze. The coffin she held in one hand was pulled into segments by a skeletal framework, then reconfigured with incredible speed. When the reconfiguration was complete, the figure between Arato and the fire held a giant hemispherical umbrella.

Then, the burning car exploded. She remained there, standing between Arato and the fiery nightmare, as if to say 'I will protect you.'

After the blast from the explosion blew away, it seemed to take

his fear with it, and Arato finally got a good look at the young girl in front of him, and was struck speechless by her simple beauty. Her pale violet hair danced in the hot wind left behind by the explosion. She didn't have a hint of makeup on, but he couldn't take his eyes off her glowing skin and stunning face.

She turned to look at him. "You requested help," she said, in a clear voice. She was a little shorter than Arato, but she wasn't showing the least bit of strain at holding her massive black device in one hand.

Arato couldn't help but feel intimidated by her. "Uh, thanks," he said.

Her umbrella reconfigured again, returning to its coffin form. She looked a little older than him. When she opened her lips again, he noticed how pale they were. "My name is Lacia," she told him, and her ice blue eyes fixed on him as if waiting for a response.

It took him a moment to realize what she was waiting for. "I'm Arato Endo," he said, voice quivering with fear that still sent tremors through his body. But the expression on her face was so calm that it helped to still the turmoil in his own heart. He realized, then, that she was beautiful enough to steal his breath away.

The black and white bodysuit she was wearing was so tight that he could see every line of her body underneath. From the way she was easily hefting her giant equipment in one hand, he could tell she wasn't human.

Arato didn't care who or what she was. He reached out his free right hand to take one of her hands. "We need to get out of here!" he told her. "If these flowers get you, you'll go crazy."

The falling flowers were being sent dancing through the air by the hot wind from the fire. The thing that had once been Marie had fallen over in the road, probably knocked down by the explosion.

The flowers that had fallen on the road and walls around them were gathering into bouquets like groups of silkworms making cocoons. They were everywhere: on houses, on the streetlights. It was like looking at a botanical garden for plastic flowers. The windows and doors of the nearby low-rise houses were completely covered in blossoms, and Arato could hear voices from inside yelling that the doors wouldn't open.

His instincts were whispering that he needed to run away. The tentacles of fear that sprang from his childhood memories were squeezing cold sweat out of him.

But, despite being covered with the same deadly flowers that had controlled Marie and the car, Lacia continued walking calmly. "Why must we run?" she asked.

Arato tried to tug on her arm, but her thin body didn't budge an inch. Of the two of them, only Arato's face was creased with panic.

His heart hadn't stopped hammering since the explosion had threatened to swallow him.

Calm among the chaos of the world around them, Lacia asked him another question. "Are you afraid?"

"Of course I am! We could die here any second!" he yelled.

"Anyone would be freaked out right now."

"Then, do you intend to continue to allow that fear to overcome you?" Her question was like a sharp jab to the heart.

He hadn't expected to get a lecture in courage from a machine. The urge to yell at her to mind her own business was strong but, even though she was a robot, he couldn't bring himself to raise his voice at a girl like her. Instead, he asked, "What good will overcoming my fears do me now?"

"If you do not fight back now," said Lacia, "when will you fight?"

The flowers that made machines go crazy were still falling. There were potential enemies all around them. Arato wanted to shout that this wasn't the time or place, but in the end he kept his mouth shut from pure frustration.

Still, she may have been frustrating, but she was also beautiful. He wanted to stop walking, to stand there and face her and just look at her. But after an explosion like that, people were sure to come out of their homes to see what had happened. They would get dragged into whatever was going on. Imagining what would happen, Arato felt a horrible, sickly chill run up his spine.

The demon flowers in Lacia's pale violet hair had started to bloom. Her black coffin looked like a giant bouquet.

Forget fighting back; there was literally nothing Arato could do. While he tried and failed to think of a course of action, the petals on her white skin began to sprout short legs.

Arato felt like he was about to lose his mind to pure terror. "Just stay still for a second," he said, then clenched his teeth and reached out one hand. The flowery crown that had formed from layers of blossoms scattered and fell. He managed to brush away the danger that had threatened her, and the thought that he could contribute something gave him courage.

"Looks like you were right. I can fight back after all; I just needed to try," said Arato, thanking her with his actions.

Lacia was an hIE, so maybe it was like his buddies had said, and she wouldn't understand the human emotions he was showing her. But still, he was satisfied just showing her his thanks.

"Let's go!" He squeezed Lacia's hand and pulled her along with him. This time she didn't resist. He noticed, with surprise, that her hands were warm.

There was always the danger of another car trying to run him

down, so he kept to the narrower streets of the residential district.

“Lacia, you’re an hIE, right?” he asked. “Could you call the police?”

When he finally had the presence of mind to check, Arato noticed that the only thing falling from the sky anymore was a gentle rain. Looking back, he saw that there was no visible wrecks on the main street. He ran past the side of the burning car, which was still covered in flowers. The flowers on the ground were flowing toward Arato and Lacia like a wave.

Without lungs, Lacia didn’t run out of breath even running along with the giant black weapon in one hand. “The police lack equipment capable of disabling this enemy,” she told him.

Even though he was running for his life, Arato felt his heart soaring so much he wanted to yell, probably because of Lacia’s hand, which was gripped tightly in his.

The familiar sight of the town at night seemed brand new to his eyes, and he had no idea where he was running to. Arato just knew that he was running together with a girl who wasn’t actually a human. All he knew about her was her name.

He looked back at Lacia and she spoke, her light violet hair bouncing as she ran. “Arato, do you trust me?”

Lacia wasn’t an ordinary hIE. Arato thought her appearance and the falling flowers could even be connected, somehow.

“Yes!” Despite his doubts, Arato’s yell split the night. He figured it would be uncool of him to doubt a girl.

He may not have had a destination in mind, but he was running full speed, holding tight to Lacia’s hand. If he kept running in that direction for another five minutes, though, they would arrive at the Endo apartment, where Yuka was waiting.

While he was still wondering where to go, a sharp impact to his side threw him to the ground. As he grunted in pain, a second car roared by, inches from his head. Lacia had just saved him from being run down.

Then she was straddling him, pressing him down to the pavement. “Arato Endo,” she said, “I have a request for you.”

The moon shone white in the sky above, and Lacia was staring him straight in the eyes. “Become my owner.”

A warm, wet feeling was spreading from where she was straddling his waist. Her whole body was wet, as though she had recently come out of the water. Droplets pattered onto Arato from her hair, gathering and running down his chest like teardrops.

“What do you mean ‘owner’?” Arato asked in confusion. “You want me to claim you or something?”

“I have decided that you are the most suitable candidate to be my

first owner,” Lacia told him calmly.

Arato had no idea what kind of standard had led her to that conclusion. With sudden death all around them, he didn’t think it was a good time to make that kind of decision. “Don’t just decide that on your own,” he protested. “You don’t know anything about me.”

For some reason, he thought about Yuka and his friends just then. His chest felt tight. What kind of danger would this decision drag them all into?

“I do not need any more information about you,” Lacia informed him. “You said that you trusted me.” Her slightly wet body leaned down on his, as if she needed his support.

Lacia had saved him from the exploding car. But it had still been his decision to fight down his urge to run and reach out his hand to her. A girl was right in front of his eyes, lips pressed together, waiting for his response. Looking at her, knowing she wasn’t human and that she was far stronger than him, he felt the need to protect her.

“Okay!” he said finally.

“I judge your reaction as consent,” Lacia announced. “I will now confirm the details of our contract.” She bent her beautiful figure to rest a hand on Arato’s shoulder as he lay there. “You have no need to participate directly in the actions I will take,” she continued. “I will provide strength. I ask only one thing of you.”

Arato couldn’t follow what she was saying. He just kept getting lost gazing at her lips.

“I am a tool, and cannot take responsibility for my own actions,” Lacia went on. “Therefore, I request that you take responsibility for me.”

There was a sudden sharp, thunderous noise from nearby; Lacia had fended off a second attack by the car with her coffin, which she had stood up on the road. The tires squealed as it tried to push through the barrier, but several anchors were holding the coffin to the street. The impact from the high-class car hadn’t budged it an inch.

“I will now gather your biological information, owner. After I have confirmed this information, I will ask for your consent to this contract twice more.” Lacia took Arato’s hand and guided it toward her own body, where there was a metal component, almost like a keyhole, in the neck of her skin-tight suit.

She brought Arato’s pointer finger near it, and then she pushed his finger inside the keyhole. “Registering Arato Endo as the owner of class Lacia humanoid Interface Elements Type-005,” she said. “This hIE’s equipment device, Black Monolith, is capable of autonomous judgment, and as owner you will accept all legal responsibilities for the actions it takes. Please confirm.”

“Okay,” Arato answered.

Lacia's hair accessory started to glow cerulean blue. "I will begin recording your life log, owner. If the correct procedures are followed and a legal request made, this record may be disclosed and displayed in a court of law in response to relevant litigation. I require your consent to this in order to release the lock on my device."

"Okay!" Arato answered again.

A metal fixture at the waist of Lacia's white suit, four wings overlapping to form a shackle, twisted; one part rising up, as though it was some kind of lever. Blue light shot through the shackle, and a light blue glow began to spill out of Lacia's black coffin.

As Lacia was bathed in blue light, Arato heard a faintly dry, rustling noise. Carried by the wind, flowers had begun to rain down on them again; the two of them were still under attack. Since they had stopped running, whatever was controlling the flowers had sent them to fall over their heads once more.

But, even under the deadly rain of five-colored petals, Lacia was calm. "In order to disable the sub-units currently attacking us, I recommend severing their optical transmissions," she said. "I believe this will be the option that has the least impact on our surroundings, and it presents the least possible level of danger to this society."

Arato was having trouble keeping up. A moving pile of trash and lamps was crawling along the ground toward them as they stood still. The flowers were using Marie as a foundation for their pile. Arato could see her body crawling along underneath it all, dragging her skirt along the ground.

With a creaking, grating noise, the strange shape, covered in flowers and wounds, dragged itself toward them. It was equal parts art and insanity, and it was closing in with every passing second.

"If you can stop them," Arato yelled, "do it now!"

"However," Lacia went on calmly, "the three-dimensional control artillery barrage will also disable all wireless connections in range. There is the possibility that this will disable vital life-preserving devices utilized by humans within this range."

Arato had been hoping she would just take care of it, but Lacia's eyes, as she gazed at him, were dead serious.

"That will be your responsibility, owner," she told him.

Arato couldn't really grasp the full weight of what she was saying. But he could tell, from the feeling of her hand on his shoulder and the look she gave him, that the choice he was being given was a very heavy one.

"Owner, please decide: will you accept responsibility for the possible danger to human life, and authorize the use of my artillery?" she asked.

Arato's nerves shied away from the combination of the terms

‘responsibility’ and ‘human life,’ but he trusted her.

“Do it!” he commanded.

Lacia nodded. The coffin, still anchored to the street, opened its thick outer shell. The bundle of black metal plates stored inside began to rotate and expand in three dimensions like a metal tree spreading its branches.

Then the world around Arato changed in the blink of an eye. It was like suddenly waking up from a nightmare; the flowers were gone, and the street looked just like it always had.

“They’re gone,” Arato exclaimed, pushing himself up automatically and surveying their surroundings. Even the noise, which had been pounding down on them until just a moment ago, had disappeared. “They’re all gone,” he said again.

“I have struck the sub-units with a negative curvature material film, rendering them invisible to a specific band of frequencies,” Lacia told him solemnly. “They are no longer able to receive command signals or wireless energy transfers from the main unit, and are therefore nullified.”

“I mean, I get that they’re invisible now, but I don’t understand the rest of that...” Reaching out his hand to feel the surface of the road, Arato felt something dry crumble under his touch, and reflexively jerked his hand back with a gasp. But, after steeling himself, he reached out again; he couldn’t see them, but he could feel soft piles of the petals. The flowers were all still there. But, since Lacia had made them invisible, all the wireless signals were passing right through them.

She had hit every single one of the tens of thousands of petals with a single attack. Since she had done it all while remaining perched on Arato’s chest, he had no idea how hard it had been for her.

A gust of wind blew by and, with a dry rustling, an invisible blizzard of flowers was carried away.

Arato was shaking so hard he thought his heart would stop. He may not have been too bright, but he had at least noticed that Lacia was far from normal. A deep, animal part of his brain was telling him that he could not handle the power he had just witnessed.

“What the heck WAS that?” he gasped. “You’re incredible!” His instincts were starting to worry that this ‘girl’ he now owned was incredibly dangerous.

For her part, Lacia simply stood without a word.

Looking up at her, Arato momentarily saw her as a giant monster, towering over him. For just an instant, he saw her as something not beautiful, but terrifying. But, more important than any of that, Arato was on a time limit. He had to get home before Yuka’s ice cream melted.

When they arrived at the entrance to the apartment, Arato asked Lacia how long it'd been since they met. She told him eight minutes. He could hear police sirens off in the distance.

"What took you so long?" Yuka was waiting to rush out and confront him as soon as he signaled the door lock open with his pocket terminal.

"Hey, sometimes shopping is hard," Arato told her, pulling the package of rice out of the shopping bag. He made sure to check the bag for flowers, just in case.

Yuka was speechless. Clearly in a panic, she pointed at Arato with a shaking finger. "Ah, ah, A-Arato!"

"My name is Lacia," Lacia said, introducing herself. "Pleased to meet you."

As Lacia politely bowed her head, all the blood drained from Yuka's face. Obviously, since Arato was Lacia's owner now, there was nothing strange about her being there with him. Of course, her having the form of a human made things more complicated.

"Oh my gosh, my brother just bought a girl," Yuka wailed.

"Hey don't say it like that," Arato protested. "I didn't pay a single cent for her!"

"That's even worse!" Yuka said accusingly. Of course, Yuka's reaction was only natural; most people didn't come home from getting groceries with an unknown girl in tow. Yuka looked like she was seriously about to start crying.

"I'm so sorry for whatever my brother did to you," Yuka said, her voice shaking and catching as she bowed her head deeply. "I'll make sure he gets rehabilitated. I think he's a first time offender, so please go easy on him."

Arato was about to tell her she was misunderstanding and to raise her head. Before he could, though, Lacia untangled the siblings' thread of understanding.

"I am not a human," she explained to Yuka. "I am an hIE. Therefore, taking me home is not a criminal act. I did not have an owner, so Arato Endo agreed to take me in. Despite the circumstances, our contract is official."

"As expected," Arato sighed, "an hIE is a heck of a lot better at explaining things." Lacia's calm explanation made him forget his nerves. In fact, even the fact that he had just been under attack seemed like a distant memory.

"What?" Yuka said, raising her head. "Seriously?" She was actually sniffing back tears. Arato wasn't sure whether to be happy that she was so worried about him, or sad that she had suspected him of being a kidnapper.

"So yeah, about that," he began. "Do you think it would be all

right if we let Lacia... -san, crash here?" Arato couldn't bring himself to drop the respectful honorific.

"Yeah. I understand," Yuka said, wiping at her eyes.

"Wait, you're seriously okay with this?" Arato asked.

But Yuka's smile was quick to return. "You found her and picked her up, right?" she said. "So, I guess she's yours now."

Arato felt like he should tell Yuka about everything that happened. Honestly, he just wanted to grab Lacia and his sister and run inside, but he didn't want to freak Yuka out.

"Listen, Yuka," he said. "While I was out shopping, a whole bunch of flowers started falling from the sky. Marie, the Yuzawas' hIE, got broken. I think whoever was doing it might have been targeting Lacia."

Arato had asked if Lacia knew anything about who was behind the attack, but she didn't. All she'd said on the way back was that she would make arrangements for patching up the damage that had been done. She could not, however, be more specific about what that meant.

Arato, having just stepped out of a nightmare and back into the real world, was still trying to sort out his concept of reality, and couldn't give Yuka a very good explanation, either. At a loss for words, he simply rolled up the hem of his shirt and showed her where a large bruise was forming. "Here, look. A car hit me right there. Lacia showed up and protected me."

"Well that's good," Yuka remarked. "She really saved your butt." She really had.

"Come to think of it," Arato admitted, "I really was useless back there."

"Well there hasn't been anything on the news about any of that," Yuka said. "And if you thought she could be dangerous, how come you brought her back?"

Arato smiled, just a little. Yuka didn't particularly trust in Lacia, but she did trust in her big brother. He wanted to thank her, but Yuka was already digging around in his shopping bag for her ice cream.

"So she's ours now, right? hIEs cook, don't they?" Yuka asked with excitement. "So she's gonna cook for us, right? Sweet, can't wait!" Without an ounce of hesitation, Yuka was already ordering Lacia around.

"I see," Lacia said politely. "If you wish for me to cook, I can access the culinary behavior cloud and commence immediately."

"Is it gonna be good?" Yuka asked.

"The user review average for this behavior cloud is five stars," Lacia told her.

"Lacia I wuv you," Yuka said, glomping Lacia with innocent glee.

Taking Lacia's hand, she started to lead her into the house.

"Wait a minute, Yuka," Arato frowned. "So you're fine with her as long as she spoils you?" Everything was just going too smoothly; Arato didn't allow events to just carry him along, though. For some reason, he took Lacia's other hand and prevented her from following Yuka in.

But Yuka had always been good at winning him over. "hIEs have cameras in their eyes," she coaxed. "I saw it on TV. So if something happened to Marie, Lacia must have recorded it all. The police will look at that and figure it all out."

Arato and Lacia's adventure would also have been recorded on the security cameras in the nearby stores and homes. So, if there really was some kind of problem, the police would surely come to check with them tomorrow.

"Yeah, that's true," Arato said, feeling like he was worrying too much. "We should leave this kind of thing to the police." Honestly, it was strange to assume that whoever had caused that rain of flowers would continue attacking him in the future.

The main reason Arato could relax about this was that he didn't actually intend to keep Lacia for very long. He just couldn't picture her and her mysteries becoming a permanent part of the self-indulgent lifestyle that he and Yuka led without their parents around.

"You're worrying about all the wrong stuff, Arato," Yuka told him. "All we need to worry about right now is what she can do for me."

"I wish my brain worked as simply as yours," he lamented.

It was almost scary how easily a bond of common interest was forged between Yuka and Lacia.

"Things are going to be tough for you from now on, Arato," Yuka said. "I think you used up all your luck today."

"Please don't say that like it's a done deal," he groaned, "How're you going to feel if I actually run into some bad luck now?"

"If you're worried, why not just ask?" Yuka turned. "Hey Lacia, if you stay here with us, are we in danger?"

"Based on the situation as I described it to you earlier, Yuka, there is no danger," Lacia answered immediately.

Yuka nodded with satisfaction. "See? No problem." Arato's little sister was a little too unshakable. "If something comes up we can just think about it then. But right now, Lacia needs our help."

Arato wasn't really the kind of person who worried about things too much, sometimes to the extent that Ryo and Kengo would call him out about it. "You're right," he said, giving in. "Let's go have some dinner."

"I have become familiar with the contents of your refrigerator," Lacia announced. She was very good at what she did. From the random odds and ends Arato pulled out of the fridge, she'd managed

to make some damn good Chinese dishes. Arato had no idea how she did it. Nor did Yuka. So instead, they just focused on eating it.

The siblings weren't exactly the pinnacles of humanity.

It had gotten quite late, so as soon as she was done eating, Yuka took a bath and went to bed. Lacia did all the washing and cleaning up, so there was nothing left for Arato to do.

"Sorry to have you do all this," he apologized. "But you coming along really helped us out."

Lacia was in the kitchen, sorting out the haphazardly stored silverware and cookware. "There is no need to worry on my account," she said reassuringly. "Originally, hIE were mainly used for caretaking and housework."

Lacia's black coffin was resting against the wall of the living room. A cushion had been put under it to keep it from scratching the floor, which made the whole layout of the room seem odd.

Looking at Lacia's back, Arato again had the sudden feeling that he had taken ownership of something that could be a big problem. As he watched her from behind, he realized the back of her suit was open, revealing a bit of her skin.

Staring at her pale back, Arato lost the ability to think about anything else. Just watching her while she worked, Arato felt a strange sensation kindling within him. Comparing her to the equipment in the kitchen, she was just so much more alive, so much warmer-looking in her white and black bodysuit. Thinking about her like that, Arato felt heat rush to his face and he fell over on his side on the sofa.

"Crap," he asked himself, "how is this going to work?" His heartbeat was pounding loud in his own ears. He remembered the sight of her back when she had saved him the first time. He remembered her soft hand in his while they were running away together. He remembered her face in the moonlight, and the weight of her butt on his chest when he had entered the contract to be her owner. The thought had him wrestling with his own arousal.

On his side, Arato doubted that he had the strength to push himself back upright, and couldn't stop his thoughts from the path they were running down. A blush crept up his cheeks, and he felt sweat forming on his face. From now on, Lacia would be there with him every single day. Once he realized that, it didn't really matter that she wasn't a human. Arato had no idea how he was supposed to deal with that fact.

"God, I'm such a GUY!" Just like Yuka had said, maybe Arato had used up all his luck. He felt as though, if he fell asleep, his heart would stop beating. If he just lay there, he couldn't tell where his mind would start going, so he sprang to his feet instead.

“Owner, would it be easier for you if I excused myself?” Lacia was by his side. Her expression was cool as she looked down at his red and bothered face. He wasn’t sure where she had gotten them, but she had a tray with a tea set in her hands.

Figuring that he wasn’t looking too manly, stuck between sitting and standing, Arato sat back down on the sofa.

Lacia knelt and set the tray on a low table. She poured hot water from the teapot into a traditional *yuzamashi* cooling bowl. Neither of the Endo siblings had ever used a real tea set, so Arato had never seen anything like Lacia’s graceful movements.

“Woah, so you can do tea all proper too,” Arato said. Seeing the difference in skill levels between an hIE and the minor housework he usually did was actually exciting; it made him think of something he had learned in high school. His teacher had said that the norms of society could easily change within their lifetimes. For example, most of the things that were common sense during the economic highs of the 1960s were completely foreign fifty years later, in 2010. As the times changed, so would so many things that everyone considered normal. It was hard to track from day to day, but Arato’s world was being swept away by a massive wave of change.

Lacia tilted her head slightly, bowing to him. “Thank you. However, all hIE behaviors are downloaded from the control cloud through the network. This tea is simply a product of my body tracing a combination of motion capture and recorded data of humans taking these actions.”

Arato smiled in chagrin at being lectured on this by a machine. She was saying the same thing as his friend Ryo: hIEs were tools.

Lacia interpreted the look on his face, and responded, “It appeared you required basic information regarding hIEs.”

“Is it a problem for you if there are things I don’t know?”

Lacia politely refrained from responding to that.

To be honest, Arato understood hIEs so little that, until that moment, he hadn’t even thought of the fact that Lacia might have belonged to someone else before she asked him to be her owner. The more he thought about it calmly, the more fear wriggled along his spine. There isn’t a human alive who can make a decision without ever giving it a second thought afterward.

“Lacia,” he asked, “where did you come from?”

Lacia poured the tea out of the pot and into a teacup. “Is that information vital to our relationship, owner?”

Arato felt like his reliance on her and the trust he felt for her had been carved deep from their first meeting. “I don’t know a thing about you, Lacia. Look, the more I know, the less we’ll have to worry about later, and I think it can clear up some worries between us.” He wanted

to get closer to her. “Plus, I figure some stuff will get easier for me to understand once I know.”

And, if there was anything he could do for her, he wanted to show his thanks by doing it. But, whatever kind of response Arato had been imagining when he said all that embarrassing stuff, Lacia’s words didn’t match it.

She just spoke the facts. “You are a very kind person, but I believe you are making a fundamental mistake.” Lacia’s pale blue eyes didn’t waver. “I do not possess a soul.”

Her blunt statement caught Arato off guard. He was supposed to be the one in charge here, but she had left him speechless.

“I am merely utilizing a combination of human words and behaviors to present reactions that human users will find pleasant,” she continued. “My reactions are based on my predictions of how the reactions will be received, and are not guided by a single, consistent personality.”

As technology advanced, it was no longer humans alone that could exhibit human behavior. As long as a machine had a human figure and skeleton, they could perform exactly the same actions. The hIEs relied on the fact that, as long as their behavior patterns were optimal, they could fulfill their roles, even without hearts or souls.

“You have seen a collection of this particular hIE’s behaviors and perceived an illusion of presence behind it all, owner,” Lacia finished. “That is all.”

Arato’s head swam. His blood was boiling. He had wanted to save this girl he had met out of the blue, so he felt a surge of anger at her words, though he did understand that what she was saying was the truth.

When she had thanked him, though, it had been hard not to imagine her as a person. Having her deny that, calling herself a thing, made him angry. With the realization that this was exactly what his friends had been poking fun at him about, Arato’s illusions were stripped away. When humans interact with other humans, there was a sense of something being shared, and this allowed them to endure each others’ idiosyncrasies.

But that same understanding did not exist between Arato and Lacia, because there is nothing shared between humans and machines. Arato doubted he would have even gotten involved with Lacia if she didn’t look like a human. Fear, regret and disappointment were a swirling storm in his head. Unable to say a word, he just sat there, listening to the veins in his neck throbbing. His feet were shaking as if he was staring over the edge of a bottomless abyss.

And yet, seeing his trouble, the heartless Lacia had said: “I do not possess a soul.”

Arato looked up at the ceiling. He had been flying high, which made it all the worse when he was brought crashing back down to reality. He closed his eyes. On the back of his own eyelids, he saw the two images that had become his own starting line: the red-black explosion, and the little white dog wagging its tail.

He let out a warm sigh. The behavior of the dog, the way it wagged its tail, had saved Arato when he was small. It had given him the strength to restart his life. He'd reach out his hand to help someone he'd thought needed helping, even if that gesture was meaningless.

"Just because you don't have a soul doesn't mean you don't have an impact," he corrected her gently.

Arato was angry at himself for getting angry at her. When he was a kid, he hadn't seen anything like a soul in that little white dog. But seeing it enjoying life had given him courage.

"It doesn't mean you can't move a person's heart," he said. Warmth overflowed in Arato's chest, as if to fill in the hole left by his earlier weakness.

It seemed as though having his feelings shot down just made them shift all the more rapidly. Arato wasn't by any means smart, so he always felt like he had to keep acting. He wanted to find something he could do for Lacia.

"I may have had the wrong idea, sure," he went on. "But I can't just sit here without worrying about what you're feeling, Lacia."

Since one of them lacked a heart, the normally meaningless silence that descended over them felt heavy. Lacia gave Arato a mysterious smile. "I have no feelings for you to worry about," she reminded him.

Right, she wasn't even capable of feeling worry in the first place; still, Arato wanted to do something for her. He felt heat warming his face, enough so that he knew anyone could see the redness of his face.

"I'm such a moron! Goddammit!" Pain and embarrassment at his own naivety pushed out of his chest in the form of a loud yell.

Moments later, light footsteps approached quickly from the hall. Yuka, in her pajamas and with a pillow in one hand, appeared with a deathly glare on her face. "Arato, I'm trying to sleep!"

Whether one sleeps soundly or not, tomorrow will always come. The next morning, as expected, Arato found Lacia still in the living room. She wasn't just sitting around, either. After preparing breakfast for the Endo siblings, she saw them both off to school.

Yuka was always a bundle of energy, and had many friends at school. Their dad was still busy with work and hadn't come home. Lacia kept working and in no time, she was a normal part of the Endo's social circle. In that way, four days quickly passed by since the

incident.

Arato awoke to the sound of his alarm. Reaching a hand out from under his covers, he grabbed the pocket terminal sitting by his pillow. The terminal connected him with the person who had set up a morning call for him without him even needing to ask.

〈 I am preparing breakfast. Are you arising? 〉 Lacia's clear voice tickled Arato's ear. He leaped up from his bed, so excited that it made his heart pound.

"What's for breakfast?" He could have just gone to the living room and checked, but he wanted to keep listening to her voice.

〈 I have attempted french toast, 〉 she told him. 〈 You mentioned that you had never tried it before. 〉

Arato honestly found it extremely embarrassing how much she spoiled him. Standing, he grabbed his own head. "Are things really okay, going on like this?" he asked himself. "No, obviously they aren't."

In the living room, he found Yuka with a relaxed look on her face. She was munching on a piece of french toast, which had been toasted to a fox-like orange.

"Morning," Arato said.

"Mm-hm." With her fork in one hand, Yuka mumbled around a mouthful of food.

Lacia's presence had brought a more normal routine to the Endo siblings' previously laid-back lifestyle, which was nice. But because of that, Arato never felt like he got as much sleep as he would have liked to.

"How are you feeling this morning, owner?" she asked. The black and white bodysuit she had been wearing when they'd met had been replaced with a more ordinary outfit. She had also taken off the device lock that had been at her waist.

In normal clothes it was impossible to tell her apart from any other human, and Arato shifted his gaze away from her without thinking. It was embarrassing seeing her wearing his own jeans and shirt.

"Arato, it's too early for you to get all hot n' bothered," Yuka grumbled at him.

Hearing that from his little sister put a damper on Arato's morning. Still, he stole a glance at Lacia's cool profile. She may not have been human, but there was still the fear that she wouldn't appreciate his staring.

"We really do need to get you some new clothes," he said, going to the fridge for some juice. Only then did he notice there was already a teapot on the table.

He couldn't have Lacia do every little thing for him, so he at least

poured his own black tea. There hadn't been any tea leaves in the house, so she must have mail-ordered them. The strong scent that wafted off of the cup along with the steam really helped to wake Arato up.

Lacia, standing at the electric hot plate with an apron around her waist, was gauging the right time to flip over some french toast. It smelled really good. Since she had come, mornings had become more relaxed; Arato had more time than he knew what to do with. He synced his personal terminal with the TV. The home system that monitored all the electronics in the house handled all the complicated stuff for getting the sync set up.

The 3D TV screen showed Arato data the home system decided he should see, and an e-mail he didn't remember seeing before caught his eye. "Hey, this e-mail here," he said. "It's for you. How come I'm seeing it?"

The e-mail on the screen was addressed to Yuka, but for some reason it had been specially flagged so that Arato could see it, too.

Suddenly fully awake, Yuka leaned over the table. "Just open it," she urged.

On the 3D display's white board, Arato saw a sender name he had never heard of before. He opened the file and read it, then he felt his ability to think clearly run off somewhere.

"Yuka," he said absently, "why don't you sit down."

"Uh, I AM sitting down," she retorted.

"Okay," he asked, "so what the hell is this model audition thing about?"

The e-mail on the screen was brief. 〈 Ms. Yuka Endo, 〉 it read, 〈 Lacia, the hIE you recommended for our hIE Model Audition, has been selected for the Grand Prix. 〉

"Isn't that awesome?" Yuka asked excitedly. "She made it into the Grand Prix."

She accessed the link in the e-mail, and the advertisement page announcing the Grand Prix came up on the screen. Then, as information expanded through the network, images of models in various poses were displayed. So basically, this media group was collecting hIE models, and Yuka had sent in visual data of Lacia along with an application. This e-mail was the result.

"There! Look at that one!" Yuka drew Arato's attention to a photo of Lacia, wearing Yuka's school uniform. He had no idea when Yuka had taken it.

The photos of a few other hIEs were lined up alongside Lacia's as final candidates, but he only had eyes for her.

"Man, she's pretty," she sighed. "I made the right choice."

Aside from Lacia's photo, the other thing that caught Arato's eye

was the name of the event's sponsor. "Hey," he said, "aren't they pretty famous?"

"Yeah," Yuka agreed. "They've been promoting this on TV, too."

In other words, Lacia's photos were soon to be spread all over all sorts of media. Arato felt a headache coming on; they never had gotten to the bottom of that whole flower storm attack.

"Aren't you gonna say anything to me, Arato?"

"You m-m-moron," he stuttered, feeling pissed off.

Yuka had obviously been looking for some compliments, and her voice turned whiny. "Well she IS really pretty. I just thought it'd be a waste not to use that."

"That doesn't mean you should do this kind of thing without talking to me about it," he fumed. "You need to think these things through!"

Lacia, the object of their debate, seemed completely fine with it all. "I don't mind," she said.

"See?" Yuka pouted. "It's Lacia's choice, and she says it's okay."

"She's an hIE, she's not gonna disagree with a human about stuff like this," Arato retorted. An hIE wasn't a human. As Lacia had said, they had no souls. Their words were nothing more than ideal responses to human requests.

Lacia flipped some french toast over with a spatula before turning to look at Arato. "Regardless," she said mildly, "time cannot be turned back, owner."

The sound of oil popping in the pan made Arato realize how hungry he was. His body was telling him to stop sweating the small stuff and focus on food. "But what are we going to do about this?" he asked no one in particular, slumping into a chair.

Lacia had been under attack when they'd met, just like him. If an enemy were looking for Lacia specifically, her location would soon be broadcast to the whole world.

"I told you about everything that happened, right?" he asked Yuka. "Well now, even though that incident never got cleared up, things are blowing up even worse. What the hell are we supposed to do now?"

Touching a finger to her lips, Yuka put on a serious expression. "I guess I'm just living in the future?" She was the type who, if you gave her a button to press, would immediately press it without looking at any instructions.

"I don't know what the hell kind of future you're trying to get to," Arato muttered.

The Endo siblings heard a quiet laugh coming from nearby; Lacia was laughing. Still in her apron, she had her right hand pressed lightly to her mouth in a very dignified gesture of mirth. It was the first time

Arato had seen such a bright smile on her face.

“So hIEs can laugh...” he murmured in surprise. It was the kind of expression that came deep from within the heart. Looking at that, it was hard to believe Lacia had no soul.

Phase2 「 Analog Hack 」

Arato's mornings had changed ever since Lacia had entered his life. In place of hitting the snooze button multiple times on his alarm before waking up in a messy rush, now Arato was gently shaken awake each morning.

After slipping on a simple shirt and some sweats, he washed his face and went to the kitchen. In the eight-tatami-mat living room, there was a table with four chairs around it.

He said, "Good morning," and sat down.

"You're late, Arato." Yuka seemed to be in a good mood. She was holding a teacup with a cat on it gingerly; the cup had green tea in it.

"If you add sugar," Lacia advised her, "it will taste like black tea."

"Really?" Yuka perked up.

"It seems in Thailand, it is common to add sugar to this particular brand before drinking it." Lacia's pale violet hair swayed when she turned to look at them from where she was standing at the kitchen counter. She was a humanoid android called an hIE, and she was beautiful, even when dropping useless info bombs on them.

A painful feeling in Arato's chest snapped him out of his daydreaming. She may not have had a soul, but her expression was perfect. Arato felt his face go red and start throbbing, like he had just been holding his breath.

Yuka narrowed her eyes a little, and put a finger to her lips. "Huh," she decided, "let's try it." Then she grabbed the sugar bowl, and poured two heaping spoonfuls into the cup. Realizing that she had nothing to stir with, she stuck her chopsticks into the cup and spun them around.

"Here you go, Arato," she said, handing her brother the cup.

"Why do I have to try it?!"

Lacia brought over a tray with rice and miso soup.

"Listen, this whole thing is your fault, so you need to do something about it. I can't even start to wrap my head around all the crap going on right now," Arato said. He gave thanks for the food, and raised the miso soup with fried tofu and cabbage to his lips. Lacia was trying to fix his lack of vegetables; since their mother had passed away over 10 years ago, he wasn't used to being fussed over this way.

"There is no 'crap' going on," Yuka told him, squeezing some rice dip out of a tube. It was close to mayonnaise, a good pairing with the

rice. "Dad said he was totally fine with Lacia staying here."

"Sure, he said that," Arato said. "But did he really know what he was agreeing to?"

He had called their dad the night before, who was still absent due to work, to explain the Lacia situation. Despite being heavily involved in fundamental hIE research, their dad said he didn't know anything about the device Lacia was equipped with. Same with the rain of flowers that happened on the day Arato became Lacia's owner, and with whatever had been controlling Marie.

"It was great," Yuka sighed. "He took one look at Lacia's face and said 'okay.'"

"As his high school aged son, I don't think his reaction was 'okay' at all," Arato disagreed. Their normally serious father had coughed and looked away as soon as he saw Lacia's face. It wasn't a great feeling, realizing his dad had a weakness for pretty girls.

"Come to think of it," he went on, "the police didn't show up after that flower thing, and it hasn't been in the news, either." A car had blown up, which, Arato thought, should have been enough to warrant some action. But, according to the neighbors he'd asked, all that had happened were some doors and windows getting locked, and once they were open all that was left was a broken car and Marie. Even with the storm of flowers that had fallen, a search afterward couldn't turn up a single petal.

"You still haven't told Ryo or Kengo about Lacia," Yuka observed.

"Yeah," Arato admitted, "there's that, too." It was true. Arato still hadn't mentioned Lacia to his childhood friend Ryo, or classmate Kengo. The pile of problems he was facing gave him a headache.

Yuka displayed her bad manners by tapping away at the tabletop, which was also a flat-screen computer terminal, while she ate. Since the whole surface of the table was a screen, there were bowls of miso soup and rice obscuring most of the fashion magazines that came up, rendering them unreadable.

Yuka wore a sly grin as she brought an ad up onto the screen.
〈 Fabion Media Group's hIE Model Audition Grandprix — Lacia 〉 , it read. The ad had an image of Lacia. After seeing that the reward for the contest was way bigger than he had imagined, Arato had given up on fighting it.

"Lacia's got her first job on Sunday," she reminded them.

"Seriously," Arato wondered, "what are we going to do about this?"

"Hey, luck only comes to those that laugh in the face of danger," Yuka said breezily. "This is our big chance!"

"That sounds like the motto of an action hero."

Lacia, the subject of their discussion, was calm and cool. Her

actions were all chosen based on what Arato and Yuka did, so she never had to fear failure. "It will not be a problem for me," she told them. "You do not need to worry, owner."

"Let's just chill," Yuka suggested. "Here, have some tea, Arato."

"Thanks." The green tea Arato sipped tasted very sweet. Come to think of it, this was the green tea Yuka had dumped sugar in just a minute ago.

"How is it?" she wanted to know.

"It's actually pretty good," he admitted.

"Huh, I'll try some too, then." Yuka stuck her lips out and carefully took a sip from the teacup. Her eyebrows rose with the surprise of a happy discovery. "Life's all about trying new things," she sighed in contentment.

Arato felt as if he was becoming just as idiotic as his little sister.

Yuka had morning duty at her middle school, so she took off early, leaving Arato alone with Lacia.

"Are you really okay with this whole modeling thing?" he asked.

Lacia had completely finished all her normal morning chores, and had sat down directly across from Arato. He had told her to find some clothes for herself, and even though the ones she had chosen were cheap, they looked great on her. Arato didn't know what to do with his eyes.

"I have checked the contents of the documentation," she told him. "It appears to be a standard proxy labor contract." The content of the contract was over Arato's head, so he had left it for Lacia to figure out; a lot of people used hIEs as secretaries to keep track of complicated paperwork.

An hIE was the property of its owner. So, the proper procedure was to contract the hIE's owner for the labor, then the owner would send the hIE as a proxy to complete the labor on the owner's behalf. But Arato was still a minor, so he couldn't sign the proxy labor contract himself. That was why he had contacted his dad the night before, after not talking to him for a while.

"Dammit, Yuka, you can't just set stuff like this off and then run away," Arato grumbled. "I need to give her a nice, long lecture."

"It appears to me that you spoil Lady Yuka quite a lot, owner." Lacia had hit the nail on the head, so Arato had nothing to say.

"What do you mean you 'picked up' an hIE?" Kengo demanded. Class was over for the day, so it was just the three of them left in the classroom.

"I couldn't turn down a girl asking me to take her home, could I?" After Arato explained the situation, Kengo looked at him like he was

an idiot.

Arato firmly believed anyone would make the same choice in his place, but Kengo appeared to disagree. "A normal hIE costs as much as a car," he argued. "And if this one is good enough to win a modeling audition in one try, she's a high-end one. Did you even tell the police what happened?"

"Well, if she's that expensive," Arato said, defending his actions, "then whoever lost her will see her modeling and come to claim her." It wasn't as though he hadn't worried about the implications of what he was doing. If Lacia herself hadn't convinced him that getting her image out there could be a good thing, he would have had her turn down the audition award.

"Well, what do you know," Ryo snarked, "Sometimes you do think things through, Endo."

"Right," Arato said, not rising to the insult. "Anyway, I'm gonna link up with the house. It'll be faster for you just to see her."

"So your hIE can handle calls on her own?" Ryo asked, looking at the screen of Arato's pocket terminal.

Arato had given Lacia a video phone so he could call her from the classroom with his friends. A 'now calling' sign popped up on the card-sized terminal display. After the third ring, the terminal connected to his home machine, and Lacia's cool gaze appeared on the screen.

〈Are these your two friends, owner?〉

Kengo and Ryo let out murmurs of surprise and leaned in for a better look. As Arato had expected, one look at Lacia herself and the way she moved, and his friends were left speechless.

Ryo, with the top buttons of his jacket open, spread his hands in surprise. "What the hell, man? After everything we've been through together, how could you keep something like this to yourself?"

Kengo pulled his pad terminal out of his bag and linked it up with Arato's. "Have her say her hIE serial number, please," he requested. "She doesn't look like an ordinary hIE at all."

"Lacia, do you know your serial number?" Arato asked. "Kengo's good with machines, so he can look up some information about you."

On Arato's terminal screen, Lacia responded kindly. 〈My serial number is: LSLX_22S99176LF. Shall I also send my unit code?〉

Kengo's terminal automatically wrote out the number as Lacia said it. Without a word, Kengo stood up. He had Arato stash his pocket terminal in his desk and dragged him out into the hallway.

In the hall, Arato was surprised by how excited his friends looked. "Hey, what the heck?" he spluttered.

"Do you live under a rock? The LSLX is Stylus's top of the line model," Kengo said incredulously. "You could have found that out in

two seconds, if you had looked. She's a super high-spec machine."

Stylus was an American producer of high-end hIEs. Arato had heard their name, of course, but with the budget of your average high schooler, they weren't a company he thought of often. But first, he asked about something that had caught his attention:

"What was that unit code thing she mentioned?"

"It's something each hIE is required by law to broadcast constantly, so we can always tell them apart from humans," Kengo answered. "If you know their code, you can track the position of any hIE. There's no way someone wouldn't be searching, if they lost a machine like that."

Ryo, who they had left behind in the classroom, also stowed his terminal and joined them in the hall. He was the son of the president of a major company, so he hadn't batted an eye at finding out that Lacia was a high-end machine.

"Well, we can't decrypt the code, but we can trace its broadcast history." Arato obviously didn't understand, so Ryo explained: "hIE dealers all have the unit codes for their merchandise so they can track it if it's stolen. So there's no way the person who lost your hIE wouldn't have been able to track her down already. Of course, there's always the possibility that she's got some mechanical condition preventing her from broadcasting the signal."

"Even if you can't decrypt the signal, anyone who knows the code should be able to pick out a signal that resembles it. But neither the dealer nor the previous owner have come to collect her. Plus you've got her face all over the net with that Grand Prix thing. It's strange that no one has come forward yet," Kengo said.

Kengo and Ryo took turns pointing out all the different ways Arato and his sister were completely clueless.

Arato, for his part, was surprised that his friends were digging in this deep. He thought they were taking it way too seriously. "Well, maybe she doesn't have a dealer or a previous owner," he told them. "Maybe I just got lucky."

Kengo was speechless, and Ryo immediately shot down Arato's wishful thinking. "No way. This is seriously shady stuff. I mean, what the hell is that huge coffin thing in your living room? I've never seen any hIE accessories like that."

"Have a little sense of self-preservation," Kengo urged him. "Wouldn't you find it odd if you just 'found' a brand new car? Just think about it: some Ferrari just shows up out of nowhere and asks you to be its owner. Wouldn't that freak you out? This is like some kind of urban legend."

"How come all your analogies involve cars?" Arato asked, voicing his honest impression.

With school already over, the evening sun was shining in through the windows of the hallway.

“Kaidai, I really want to punch this moron,” Kengo said.

But Ryo, for his part, had a good head on his shoulders sometimes. “Have you told your dad about this, Arato?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Arato responded. “He said we could keep her.” Both of his friends gave him looks that said they didn’t believe him. They had some respect for Arato’s father, who was working for a semi-public research institute.

Ryo grabbed Arato in a headlock. “Forget about that. I can’t believe you kept this from us for a whole week! Some friend.”

Arato went back to the classroom and looked at his pocket terminal, where Lacia was still waiting dutifully on the other line. (It seems to me your friends are worried for you, owner.)

“They just keep an eye out for me since I tend to be careless,” he explained. Arato didn’t see anything dubious about Lacia. But his friends were obviously on guard about her, even knowing she had saved his life.

Ryo spoke, not to Lacia but to Arato; “Get her behavior cloud serial number, too.”

Before Arato could pass the request on to Lacia, she had already sent a code with over forty digits of mixed numbers and letters to his terminal.

Ryo took a photo of the code with his own terminal. “hIEs get their behaviors from different control services,” he explained. “So, with her behavior cloud serial, we can track down what company is feeding directions to our lovely lady here.”

The actions taken by each hIE were not decided within the humanoid units. Instead, each hIE would communicate with a massive behavior control cloud and receive instructions on the optimal action to take based on the data the hIE sent.

When he tracked down the information he was looking for, Ryo’s face went stony. Arato grabbed his arm. They had known each other since childhood, and Arato knew Ryo had a habit of trying to keep bad news to himself.

Just as he thought, the information on the terminal screen Ryo showed him wasn’t good: ‘MemeFrame Co., Licensed April, 2105.’

“That serial number’s one of ours,” Ryo said. Ryo Kaidai’s father was the president of MemeFrame Co., and it was MemeFrame’s behavioral control service that was currently telling the soulless Lacia ‘do this.’

“So you don’t know anything about her, Ryo?” Arato hoped this revelation would be a new lead on some information, but Ryo just hid away his terminal.

“Arato,” Ryo told him flatly, “don’t get involved with her.” All Ryo’s earlier interest had vanished. He just told Arato to stay away from her, with a hard look in his eyes. Arato felt like Ryo was acting in some story he didn’t know about.

“I’m serious,” Ryo insisted. “Don’t get involved with this hIE.”

“Get involved?” Arato protested. “I’m already her owner.”

Ryo, who was always so full of confidence, couldn’t meet Arato’s eyes. In all their years as friends, Arato had never seen Ryo that pale, or wearing a smile that forced. “You should get away from her. Right now. You don’t need an hIE. You’ve got a good life.”

After that, Ryo continued to act strange. When it became clear that he was going to try to squeeze every last bit of information about when Arato met Lacia out of him, Arato headed home by himself. The whole thing had Arato’s brain in a fog, so much so that he didn’t realize he had forgotten something at school until after he and Yuka had finished dinner.

“I can’t believe you came home without your pocket terminal. How did you even ride the train?” Yuka asked, exasperated.

Lacia brought some after-dinner tea to the table on a tray. “Requests for fare and admission fees came in through the home system from owner’s personal identification tag,” she said.

“Oh, did dad give you one of those tags?” Yuka asked curiously. Purchases and fare payments these days were made automatically using the personal ID tag in everyone’s pocket terminals. It was very convenient, but it meant you couldn’t do anything if you lost your terminal. Some people took to carrying small back-up ID tags somewhere on them just in case; Arato’s was a thin, easy to wear bracelet.

“Yeah,” he said, “but I need my terminal. I’ve got homework to do, and I left my datalink at school, too.”

“Then just don’t do your homework,” Yuka shrugged. “Tell your teacher fate ate it.”

“Hey, there’s an idea,” Arato said.

“Owner, I do not believe that fate was involved.” Lacia’s cool observation kept Arato from being swept up in Yuka’s nonsense. Under Lacia’s pure blue gaze, he felt like a perfect specimen of failure.

“The school’s closed at night, though. It’s already eight, so I’ll just have to get it tomorrow,” Arato said.

“There is an hIE clerk at the school at all hours, so it should be possible to retrieve it tonight,” Lacia said.

And so, it was decided that Arato would go and get his things that night.

Arato boarded the subway, Lacia in tow. At that hour, the Urayasu line was full of white collar types returning from work, and the subway headed to Asakusa was almost empty. But the folks who were riding with them kept stealing glances at Lacia.

"I guess you'll start standing out even more once your hIE modeling stuff really takes off," Arato said. He felt a strange swell of pride, even just standing next to her.

"There may be cases where such attention could be harmful," Lacia told him. "We should ensure a means of traveling without attracting notice in the future."

To be fair, it wasn't Lacia herself drawing all the gazes. To hide her giant black coffin, they had wrapped it up in a protective sheet, so it looked like more ordinary luggage. But the sight of a weak-looking girl easily carrying a burden that was big enough to almost bump against the roof of the subway car was too strange to ignore.

"I know you get worried if you don't have that with you, but it draws a lot of attention," Arato said.

"Once my hIE modeling work begins, I expect I will not be able to carry it regularly. We should think of a countermeasure," Lacia said.

It may have been Arato's imagination, but when they stepped down onto the platform, he thought that the train tilted back a little, as if it had been relieved of a heavy load.

The subway fare was automatically deducted from his home system through the ID tag on Arato's wrist, so he was able to pass through the gates empty-handed. Only after they had left Honjo Azumabashi Station did he wonder what happened with Lacia's fare.

Arato didn't feel like going to Kengo's family shop after their earlier talk, so he decided to just walk to the school. There were a surprising amount of hIEs around the station area, when he actually looked for them. They all just seemed to blend in with the city; each one soulless, heartless. Counting the dozens, maybe over a hundred hIEs there, Arato tried to think of how each different owner handled their hIE. It made his brain overheat.

"Is something the matter?" Lacia peeked at his face curiously. Despite having seen this area numerous times, Arato was gawking around like an out-of-towner.

"I'm just thinking, it's crazy how many humans around here aren't actually human," he said. "It makes me realize just how incredible this time we're living in is." Arato realized it was the first time he had just gone on a normal walk with Lacia. Though it was a little embarrassing, it was nice to have a girl taking interest in him.

Walking by her side, even the same old road to school felt special. Once they had gotten a ways away from the station and crossed the Kototoi bridge with Tokyo Skytree to their side, the number of people

around decreased. The lights illuminating the night around them were streetlamps, plastic multipurpose signboards, and those from the houses they passed by.

“Is it still frightening to walk at night?” Lacia asked.

Arato blushed at her question, feeling like she had seen right through him.

“Should I begin walking you to school, owner?” she went on.

“No way!” Arato objected strenuously. “I am absolutely fine going by myself!” Bringing your hIE to school was against the rules. hIEs were bundles of sensors and transmitters, so in the classroom they would be a gateway to all sorts of cheating and pranks.

They arrived at the school gate. There wasn’t a single light left on in the school building.

“I have opened the gate, owner.” Lacia opened the heavy metal gate with one hand, as if it weighed nothing. She may have been shorter than him, but her strength was inhuman.

Arato still knew almost nothing about her. The only thing he did know was that the depth of her mystery made him uneasy. On the other hand, it made him excited that this mystery was his.

“hIEs really are amazing,” he remarked. With his school as a backdrop and the moonlight shining down on her, Arato stared at Lacia, transfixed. Even dressed in ordinary clothes, she looked more like a character in a story than a being from the real world.

“Let us head to your classroom, owner,” Lacia told him. It was her first time at the school, but she headed straight for the stairs, having already downloaded map data from the school’s cloud.

“Are you good at finding stuff like this?” Arato asked curiously.

“Your pocket terminal is broadcasting its location,” Lacia explained. “It is much like heading toward a light in a dark place. The world as perceived by humans is quite different from the world we perceive.” Her smile was sweet, but she was just a machine dressed like a human.

Arato’s classroom was on the third floor. They didn’t run into anyone on their way, and nothing stopped Arato from opening the door to his classroom and going inside.

“Well dang,” he said. “If it was this easy, I guess it’s good that I came to get it tonight.” There on his desk was his pocket terminal, just as he’d left it. As expected, he’d forgotten it when he’d left after talking to Kengo and Ryo about Lacia.

In the abandoned classroom it seemed as though anything could jump out of the deep shadows, which made Arato check them all nervously. Though, with Lacia there, it wasn’t all that spooky. In fact, it made him nervous in a whole different way; her movements didn’t change, even in the dark.

“Should I accompany you to school tomorrow?” she asked again.

“I don’t think so,” Arato told her. “Some weird rumors might start.”

“Too bad,” she said.

Her beautiful form walked without hesitation. Seeing that, Arato felt that walking slowly and hesitantly, with his back bent in the darkness, was strange.

“Since we have come all the way here,” Lacia said, “shall we take a walk through the school?”

Following Lacia, Arato felt like he was stepping into a completely unknown world. She really was a mystery to Arato, but that just made her all the more exciting to him. The school at night seemed to stretch out around them, lonely and fantastic. He felt his head getting all fuzzy as he tagged along right behind her. If he’d had a tail, it would have been wagging like crazy.

Lacia climbed the pitch black stairway, and Arato almost felt like they were on an adventure together. As a second year student, Arato had never been to the fourth floor, which held the third year classrooms. Just a little way above his ordinary world was a small taste of the unknown, and with a few simple steps, his world had expanded.

Lacia’s movements were gentle but quick, and she kept ahead just out of Arato’s reach. He couldn’t catch her, even after reaching the top of the stairs, and his breath grew ragged.

“Well climbed,” Lacia remarked. She was waiting for him in the darkness of the dead end.

“You walk fast,” Arato panted.

As he complained about this unfairness, she crouched down and held out her hand to him. Since they were in a high school, she almost seemed like she could be an upper-classman, offering him a hand. Suddenly, their relationship became confused in his mind. She looked so human that the idea of her going to school normally with him wasn’t so strange at all.

“Would you like to explore the rooftop?” she suggested. Without waiting for a response, Lacia opened the door to the roof, as though it was obviously the next step.

“They don’t let students go out there, ‘cause it’s covered in solar panels.” Arato tried to stop her, but ended up stumbling forward instead, out onto the rooftop, where a strong gust of night wind blew around him.

The wide roof was covered in lines of solar panels, arranged in groups of five. Each one was tilted slightly to more effectively gather sunlight. There was walking space between each of the groups for maintenance, only about two meters wide.

“Then we will refrain from touching the solar panels!” Lacia, who had gone out first, spun around as if dancing, letting her skirt flare up. The moon bathed her in white light, as if it, too, was admiring her smile. Her smooth skin seemed to glow in response, and the light seemed to accent her cheeks and the thin line of her neck.

Arato looked away without thinking, and his eyes were met with a brilliant view of the Asakusa area at night. The lights of the city were like a shining carpet, stretching from Azumabashi and Asakusa up to Ueno and beyond. It was spread out in front of him so wide, so distant, that it made Arato want to yell.

He thought, if he asked, that Lacia would take him anywhere he wanted to go. “Thanks,” he said whole-heartedly. “I’m glad I took you in, Lacia.” Honestly, it almost felt ungrateful thinking of her as something he took in, when she showed him wonderful sights like that.

“Sorry,” he went on. “Being up here, looking down, it just... It just makes me feel crazy! Like I just gotta move my body!” He ran around on the rooftop like a dumb, happy dog, running around while wagging its tail like crazy. There was no reason for it, but there was a huge smile on his face.

“Please tell me more of your wishes,” Lacia requested sincerely. “It would be good to expand your world more, owner. I am an interface made to interact with users who wish to expand their worlds.”

Arato couldn’t understand what she was saying, but he felt like the peaceful world of his school was just a stepping stone, and he was receiving an invitation to somewhere far away. In the back of his mind, he knew. He knew that the school gate and the locks on the doors hadn’t just happened to be open for them; he knew Lacia had opened them all, easily.

Lacia’s blue eyes radiated with a light, different from the lights of the city. He realized that she knew he had noticed her ability to open the locks, and also understood that he had chosen not to ask her about it.

“You said you trusted me.” She smiled. “That is why you trust in my actions as well.”

“I guess that’s true,” he agreed. Lacia was a complete unknown, but she entranced Arato. Honestly, saying that there was a possibility that her original owner might appear once Lacia became an hIE model was a lie; Arato had already formed an attachment to her. Somewhere along the way, he had decided not to let her go, even if it meant losing his ordinary life.

“Since you trust me,” Lacia continued, “how will you use me, owner?”

Arato couldn't answer that. He just felt that, as long as he was experiencing the world with her, he could expand his horizons as far as they needed to go. Excitement shook his body. He didn't know what to call this feeling inside, but it made his heart sing and blood rush to his face.

The sweet heat of it didn't fade until Yuka called him, worried at how late it was getting.

Lacia had to be at the company for her first job at 9:00 AM on Sunday.

They met the woman who was going to be Lacia's manager in a coffee shop in the Ebisu Station building, which was on the Yamanote line. She was in her thirties, and wearing light makeup. She stood when she saw Arato and Lacia walk in. She looked very capable. Sitting next to her was an assistant in a fluffy outfit whom she had apparently dragged along.

The manager made a big show of taking her pocket terminal out of her handbag. "Arato Endo and Lacia," she began, "I'm pleased to meet you. You really can't beat seeing the real thing, huh?"

Arato greeted her, thinking she seemed pretty excited.

The manager still had her pocket terminal out and seemed to be expecting something. She explained to Arato, who had no idea what she wanted, "I'll send you our digital business card, so could I have your pocket terminal please?"

"Oh, yeah," he blushed. "Sorry. I'm new to this whole thing." Arato fumbled his terminal out of his pocket. The address manager in his terminal automatically opened in response to her terminal's request signal.

While she tapped at the terminal, the woman started to introduce herself. Before she could, though, the young assistant behind her snatched away the terminal.

"Huh?" Arato said.

"Surprise," the assistant crowed back, "I'm the human one here!"

While Arato stood there, completely lost, the business card data popped up on his terminal, and the information was automatically dumped into his contacts.

The young assistant, who was wearing more makeup (mainly pink) spoke to Arato as if they were old acquaintances. "So you're Lacia's owner, huh? Boy, you're young!"

The logo of the Fabion Media Group was displayed on Arato's terminal screen.

"I'm Asuna Kisaragi," she said, introducing herself. "Fabion MG Planning Department."

“Then who is this?” Arato wanted to know.

“This is our hIE, Kasumi,” Asuna explained. “Instead of being privately owned, she’s owned by the company, so she’s a little different from your girl, Arato.”

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Kasumi,” Arato replied earnestly. “My name is Arato Endo.”

Asuna stifled a throaty laugh.

“Does anyone ever tell you you’re quite the honorable man, Arato?” Kasumi asked. She was obviously a veteran, and knew how to talk to people.

“Asuna, please refrain from trying to buddy up with our client just because he is a high school student,” the hIE lectured sternly. “We are on the clock.”

“Well, let’s all have a seat first,” said Asuna, who didn’t look too happy at being lectured by a machine. The coffee shop had wireless power supplies and hotspots available, but apparently the interior decor and service hadn’t changed in a hundred years. Time hadn’t brought any great changes to the art of giving customers a place to relax and drink coffee, and meeting clients at a coffee shop like this was an equally long-lived custom.

Asuna unfolded her pocket terminal until it was the size of a sheet of paper. “You’ve looked at the contract, right?” she asked. “Starting today, Lacia will be working as a model for Fabion, but our work orders will be coming to you, Arato.”

Lacia, who had been silent up to then, spoke up. “I have informed my owner of the implications of a proxy labor contract.”

“Got it,” Asuna said. “So you can use the secretary cloud too, Lacia? Impressive.” She did seem genuinely impressed.

“Actually, we’d like to keep all of Lacia’s information secret while she’s modeling,” she went on. “She’ll be our mystery hIE model.”

“That definitely works for me,” Arato agreed, “but won’t that cause problems for you?”

“Lacia’s just too expensive of a machine,” Asuna explained. “We decided that if we gave out her details, folks won’t feel a connection with her. The customers who’ll be buying the clothing Lacia’s going to model will be high schoolers and ladies in their tenties, and we don’t want to scare them off with the impression that she’s in a whole different world from them.”

“So she’s expensive?” Arato asked.

Asuna’s mouth popped half open, the same reaction Kengo and Ryo had given him when he’d introduced Lacia to them, and stirred her apple tea with a spoon. She must have been shaking a little, Arato realized, because he could hear the spoon rattling against her cup.

“This is honestly my first time even seeing a Stylus Supreme Class

machine in person,” Asuna admitted. “I’ve heard about 90% of the users are male, though.”

Arato avoided her gaze, nonchalantly eating the parfait in front of him. There was no way he could tell her he had just randomly taken Lacia in.

“Arato, I noticed you don’t have Lacia wear an emblem,” said Asuna.

Kengo had asked him about the same thing, as if it were strange, Arato thought. According to Kengo, it was odd for Lacia not to have any accessories with brand logos on her body. Nor were there any brand marks on her special equipment or clothing.

“Well, I just didn’t want her to stand out too much,” Arato said.

“So you’re that kind of owner, huh?” she commented. “I was going to tell you not to release any of your erotic images of Lacia to the net, but I suppose that’s not necessary.”

“Just because I’m her owner doesn’t mean I can do whatever I want with her.” Arato blushed at the way she’d seen right through his horny teenage heart.

“I know, I know. Sorry for doubting you. But, serious talk, if fans see you two being a little too friendly once she becomes an hIE model, you might catch some hate from them,” Asuna cautioned. “Obviously, hIE model owners should be free to do whatever they want. But from the consumer’s viewpoint, they see the model owners and their hIEs as having a romantic human relationship.”

She fixed Arato with a steady gaze. “I glanced at your parent’s signature. Your father is Dr. Endo, isn’t he? Lacia’s actually his, right? I’m surprised he’s letting her model.”

“You seem to know a lot about this stuff,” said Arato, whose father was a celebrity in the world of hIEs, and popped up on TV or the net every now and then.

“Despite what I’m doing right now, I actually majored in Psuedo-Human Engineering,” Asuna told him. “We talked about Matsuri during the class, obviously, and I did a paper on your dad’s work.”

“I’m sorry,” Arato apologized. “Dad didn’t really talk to us about that whole thing.” He didn’t really like talking about his dad’s work, since it kept him from ever coming home.

Fabion MG was a media group mainly devoted to fashion ads. They produced many human and hIE models, and also published magazines about fashion and local flavor. Since one of the strengths of hIE models was that they didn’t feel cold (which helped when doing shoots of thin summer clothing on chill, cloudy days), Lacia’s first job would be promoting this summer’s trends.

Arato walked about fifty meters behind the shoot, heading down Meiji-dori Street toward Shibuya. He kept his eyes on Lacia’s back the

whole time. She was wearing a short skirt and a top that seemed to go through gradations of material, with textures from leather to cotton, and a cute 3D image was displayed at her feet.

Seven cylindrical machines were floating in the air around Lacia, each of them only the size of three sugar cubes. These were ultra-lightweight cameras. Together they were able to capture Lacia from every angle, and upload the data to the network in real time.

Lacia looked like she was in a flock of butterflies with the cameras floating around her, and the shooting started while she walked along Meiji-dori Street.

Asuna, who had tagged along to watch Lacia's first job, murmured in admiration. "Looking good, Lacia."

Arato couldn't take his eyes off Lacia's back, either.

"Look, everyone's turning to look at you," Asuna pointed out. "When you're doing hIE model work, you don't want to do it all cooped up in a static setting like a studio. Best to do it out where there's some scenery, and turn it into a real event; that's what gets people talking. It's easier to buy clothes once you've seen them walking around the city. Models like Lacia, who can make even walking an art, are the most successful."

Lacia had a refined manner of walking that fit a model. Between stretches of rhythmical steps, she would pause naturally to pose now and then without seeming too obvious. With her there, the scenery became a stage for her performance.

"Incredible," Arato said. "She really does look like a model."

"The Fabion MG's custom behavior cloud she's connected to is basically a huge collection of actions that properly show off our clothing," Asuna told him. "That way, even your average hIE can become a pro model instantly when they access it. But please, feel free to keep saying nice things about it."

hIEs only acted based on recorded data of human behaviors. Even knowing that, Arato couldn't help but feel that Lacia was something special.

"hIEs are more agile than humans, so we can give them more difficult directions on timing and such," Asuna went on. "I think a lot of our directors are going to request these event-style shoots for Lacia, so you should get used to it, Arato."

Meiji-dori, which had become a major six-lane street, was being kept free of the city's normal chaos by the Shibuya Police Department. This area was mostly taken up by business offices, but there were still plenty of people around who were photographing Lacia with their pocket terminals.

Arato felt like she was so far away, even though he could easily catch up to her.

Camera drones flew like butterflies from the camera crew, who were all carrying packs that looked like mini-coolers on their backs. The drones were ultra-lightweight, but even without wind to fight against, they could only last about fifteen minutes in the air. The units that were running low would limp back to their containers, to be replaced by fully charged ones.

“This event allows for folks to take their own pictures,” Asuna told him. “It’s probably going to be nuts once we hit Shibuya.”

A huge image of Lacia was being displayed on the monitor-type billboards on one of the nearby buildings. It was a real time video of her walking against the clean city backdrop. The price of the clothes she was wearing, along with information like the materials and style, were displayed with perfect timing on the video.

Arato was caught up in the sudden rush of information he was seeing, when Asuna caught his attention. “Arato,” she urged, “check out your pocket terminal.”

After taking it out of his pocket, Arato saw that Lacia was displayed on the screen, and he zoomed in. “Huh,” he said, “it’s not showing any GPS information.”

“Why do you think we walked all the way from Ebisu to Shibuya?” Asuna asked, letting out a pleased laugh. “If we don’t give all the nearby customers a chance to gather, there won’t be any party.”

“More people are coming?” Arato looked around. He realized there was a line forming behind them, and that across Meiji-dori Street, many more people were stopping.

“It was your sister that recommended Lacia to us, right?” Asuna said. “Fabion MG is very talented at aiming for places where we can get between three thousand and ten thousand people together.”

Before Arato could ask just how amazing getting ten thousand people together was, Asuna continued. “Now, compared to the selling power of the cloud itself, ten thousand people may seem like small peanuts. But the number of folks here with us physically is only about 1/20th of the people watching this broadcast on the net.”

In the cloud-based world, a huge amount of people were all linked up to the same service. So, even if a company’s product wasn’t especially unique, they could secure great sales simply by controlling the flow of information to their customers with precision. Meaning, the cloud controlled a huge portion of economic trends. Arato had heard about it in the news.

Asuna shot him one of her characteristic grins. “Gonna come see? It’s pretty incredible when you get ten thousand people in the same place.”

“By the way, where’s Kasumi?” he asked. “The hIE from earlier.”

“Kasumi’s in the liveliest spot of the show,” Asuna told him. “She’s with the director.”

“It’s nice having dedicated soldiers at our company who can work twenty-four hours, never leave to join another company, and whose bodies don’t break down,” she went on, frowning in mock jealousy under her pink-dyed hair. “But honestly, she’s my rival. To get anywhere in the company as a human, I have to gain more trust from the clients than she has.”

As an hIE model, could Lacia’s joining the company edge other people out of a job? Since he couldn’t do anything about it now, Arato swallowed back the question that had come to mind. He decided to blame the sudden guilt on Yuka, for having kicked off this whole modeling thing in the first place.

“Well, none of that matters,” said Asuna, chiding herself and lifting her gaze. “I’ve just got to do my best for this job today!”

The closer they got to Shibuya, the more folks gathered around to watch. Lacia was moving crowds, and Arato felt like she was also moving hearts.

In Shibuya, Meiji-dori Street ran into the two layers of the Shuto Expressway and Route 246, and the region around Shibuya Station had been remodeled numerous times due to the area’s complicated logistics. Currently there was a large mezzanine that provided access to Meiji-dori Street, the bus terminals between the street, and the escalator-type foot bridge that led to Shibuya Subway Station.

Lacia adjusted the bag hanging from her shoulders. She then tapped at her bracelet-style pocket terminal, and Arato’s own device started ringing.

〈Are you watching me, owner?〉 Arato heard Lacia’s voice as it came through his terminal. From the top of a big footbridge, She turned to look at him with a brilliant smile.

Arato unconsciously started to wave back, but Asuna stopped him. “The natural pose of turning to look back at someone is one of Fabion’s custom cloud specialties,” she said. “Watch, next she’ll turn.”

Lacia spun smoothly on one foot, which set her pale violet hair dancing. For an instant, the everyday world around her seemed to become something extraordinary. Even the act of getting her hair back into place seemed choreographed, as if she was a ballet dancer or an actress in a musical.

“If she takes off as a star, we’ll actually put together a specialized program just for Lacia in the cloud. You should definitely look forward to seeing that,” Asuna said.

Pedestrians walking out of the Shibuya Station building complex raised a commotion when they encountered Lacia. It was only natural that they were surprised, suddenly running into a live modeling event

like this.

Lacia continued to play the perfect model, not missing a beat. Hundreds of people were now snapping photos of her with their pocket terminals.

Arato felt crushed by the heat and the presence of the crowd.

In the decades since the network had become a part of everyone's lives, there wasn't much that could draw people out of doors anymore. Anything that could move that many people in this day and age was huge, powerful. It was clear this was a special event, for the simple fact that it moved people who were used to not being moved. And, just as people find it easier to spend money on a trip, coming outside to see the event gave these people a whole new mindset.

Every single digital display Arato could see had been jacked to show Lacia's debut.

Chimes from hundreds of terminals, all of which were receiving data, resounded like raindrops on dry land. They were receiving a bombardment of coupons for local shops, good for that day only. With these coupons showing Lacia's image, customers could spend a day in Shibuya for less, or take advantage of certain shopping strips that were offering select bargains.

This was the power of Fabion MG. The group that had chosen Lacia. The group that could move ten thousand people.

"Is she going to be all right walking straight into the crowd like that?" Arato asked.

"If you're obviously getting in the way of a model in Shibuya, the police will get after you, so everyone keeps walking. Once she's past the station and over on the side with the Hachiko statue, she'll be meeting up with the winner from last year's Grand Prix — Angela — and Yuri, our top hIE model."

Arato heard a commotion from the other side of Shibuya Station, and guessed that the top model Asuna had mentioned was at the heart of it. Surrounded by the noise of the crowd, he was growing a little light headed, but his attention snapped back to the present when Asuna elbowed him lightly.

"We've got something real special set up at the scramble crossing by the Hachiko exit," she said slyly. "That'll be the climax of our show."

Not wanting to miss whatever was coming, Arato hurried down the foot bridge. Asuna also lowered the adjustable heel height of her pumps and followed him down the stairs.

"Excuse me, I'm just passing through," he said. Watching the bus terminal out of the corner of his eye, Arato cut across the station building. Thanks to the growing crowd, he had drifted quite a ways away from Lacia. If he didn't hurry, he was going to miss the best part

of the show.

The posters wrapped around the station's pillars all showed a girl with dark green hair, which had been cut into a bob. Arato had seen her before on TV; she was Fabion MG's top model, Yuri.

On the other side of the station was the statue of Hachiko, which had been destroyed once and resculpted. A blonde girl was leaning against the statue's pedestal, and she waved when she saw Lacia. She was an energetic girl with a clean, cute look. Her whole vibe was that of a child, raised with lots of love. Arato guessed that she must be Angela, the winner of the Grand Prix from last year.

The instant Lacia stepped into the area, a girl standing at one corner of the diagonal road crossing turned to look with perfect timing, her green hair shining and dancing as she spun. Though the girl's outfit showed a lot of skin, she made it look refined; there was something almost supernatural about her beauty that drew all eyes to her. This was Yuri.

All around Yuri were other human girls, each of them in middle or high school. They all had healthy bodies that couldn't hope to match her unrealistically sleek proportions. However, they all seemed to be enjoying themselves, and each wore accessories that matched with Yuri's.

Lacia headed toward Fabion MG's top models, as if meeting up with them had been her destination all along.

In perfect synch, the pedestrian walk signals of the diagonal crossing all turned green. The traffic lights for the streets in all four directions went red, and there just happened to be trailers wearing the Fabion MG logo parked at the stop line for each street. Music began to swell loudly, taking advantage of the dramatic moment, and the wall displays on the surrounding buildings switched to Fabion broadcasts. For a moment, that little piece of the city became a stage.

As if under a hypnotic spell, the three hIEs walked slowly out into the middle of the suddenly supernatural scene.

Three-dimensional sound announced the leading actors of the show.

Then, even though no signal or direction was given, everyone at the crossing stopped walking.

Lacia followed the pedestrian crossing out into the street. Along the way, Angela joined her, and the two met up with Yuri, who was humming to herself and waving to all the guests.

The trailers at the intersection began to project regularly-spaced 3D images in the air. Perhaps at the request of guests watching through the network, images of the girls from seconds prior were projected large, burning themselves into everyone's memories. As the girls' impression grew on everyone, the viewers felt more strongly

connected to them. They began to feel like they had been fans of these models since long before; everyone was fascinated by the oddly appealing mismatch that existed between the three of them.

When the music climaxed, the three hIE models synchronized their individual movements to execute a miraculously harmonious turn in the rest between one note and the next. After a ninety second chorus of the music ended, Lacia again started leading the procession toward the old Seibu building side.

Lacia was just another pedestrian again, but a moving crowd of people and cheers formed up around her. Left behind, Arato could only watch from the station side of the crossing.

Yuri headed into the Fashion building with a natural walk; her whole outfit for the day had been arranged by the companies in that building. Camera drones chased after her elfin back. The expressions and actions of each model were so entrancing that they made Arato forget his nerves, and he wanted to get closer to them. The people following Yuri turned naturally into just another line of customers at the Fashion building.

But the festival mood of the place hadn't died down; all the shops around, small and large, were still throwing around coupons. Mini-events ran outward from the crossing, like branches spreading out from a trunk. It was a party for separating customers from their cash, like a net spreading to catch a school of fish.

Looking around, Arato remembered that Lacia's target consumers were girls from high school age up to around twenty-five. It came to mind because he was completely surrounded by exactly that demographic at the moment.

"What the heck?" he said, realizing what had been bothering him just then. The oddity that he couldn't quite put his finger on was that no one there at that moment cared in the least that Yuri, Angela, and Lacia weren't human.

Asuna, who, Arato remembered, had majored in Pseudo-Human Engineering, murmured in his ear. "Ever heard of 'Analock'?"

"What?!" Arato could barely hear her over the sound of the crowd still remaining from the show.

"Analock hack!" Asuna yelled. "It uses the idea that hIE don't have the same meaning to their actions that humans do, even though they look like us. Humans are always looking for patterns and meaning, so we get stuck in this gap of convincing ourselves that hIE actions have meaning! So folks build hIE, then program them so humans will like them and let their guard down. Then, they use that opening to manipulate people."

For example: just then, many people had been 'hacked' into spending their money.

“Arato, your girl Lacia uses her form to get people to move of their own accord,” Asuna finished. “She hacks society itself.”

Arato, who had been left behind at the crossing, noticed many couples in the crowd around him. There were plenty of customer service shops around, so the couples could share a discounted date until evening, thanks to the coupons. He knew that what Asuna was saying was a lie which Fabion used to shield itself.

“Lacia wasn’t the one who hacked these people,” he said. “That was you and your company.”

“That’s true,” Asuna said, without any malice. “That’s just what models do. But I do get a feeling of accomplishment when everyone follows our lead so easily.”

In the end, Lacia headed up Bunkamura-dori Street to the main branch of the Tokyu department store chain. Arato was exhausted from being tossed around in the waves of humanity following her.

“You did good today,” Asuna said, handing him a plastic juice pack.

The two of them were taking a break outside the old building, which had remained the same since its rebuilding in the 21st century. There was still too much of a crowd surrounding Lacia to approach her.

Arato was grateful for the time. He didn’t know what he should say when he was face to face with Lacia again. It might not have had any effect on her, but Arato would need a bit of time for the afterglow he’d felt during the event to die down.

Across the street, in front of the Tokyu main store, yet another crowd had gathered to stare at Lacia. All the girls interested in fashion had continued on into the store, so the crowd was now mostly made up of men.

Suddenly the crowd scattered, breaking off into smaller groups. Someone screamed, and Arato jumped to his feet.

A man, who looked to be in his mid-twenties, was swinging his bag around in the middle of the scattered crowd. Another man was being escorted out of the department store with both arms pinned behind his back by a security hIE. The hIE’s bare skin was metallic, so anyone could tell its role at a glance.

“What happened?” Arato asked.

Asuna contacted someone on her pocket terminal before responding. “Looks like that guy they threw out grabbed Lacia’s shoulder. The shop tossed him out for us.”

The man the hIE security had grabbed took off running, almost falling over himself to get away. He didn’t look back as he tore off toward Yoyogi Park. His violent actions were surprising, considering the high-quality suit the guy was wearing.

“These things happen sometimes,” Asuna said, glaring after the man with a bitter expression. “That’s one of the downsides of analog hacking. People tend to interpret certain jobs and actions in the same way, when paired with a human shape.”

“So is Lacia’s job dangerous?” Arato asked.

Asuna seemed to realize that she’d said too much, and made an ‘x’ gesture with her arms. Apparently she wanted this all to be off the record, so to speak.

“Our sense of sight works faster than our brain’s ability to assign meaning to what we’re seeing. We can be moved by what we see before we can think about it, and analog hacking aims for that gap in our perception,” she told him. “Even if we’re only using it for business, our users assign meanings and stories to what they see on their own. Sometimes, those turn into fantasies that run wild in the user’s head. When things get out of control, unlike cases with human models or celebrities, the users often protest that hIEs are just objects, anyway.”

Asuna’s words disturbed Arato deeply.

“What I’m saying is that criminals have less restraint in their actions toward hIE models than they would against humans,” Asuna concluded. “But don’t worry, we take good care of all our models.”

Despite her assurance, Arato couldn’t help but feel worried.

It was already evening by the time all of Lacia’s work was wrapped up and they could head home. Arato and Lacia had been told that it would be best not to take the train home that night, so someone from the company drove them to Shin Koiwa Station.

Arato wanted a chance to walk and talk with Lacia before they arrived home. “I heard Fabion offered to provide personal security for you. Are you sure you’re okay turning them down?” he asked.

Lacia had turned down the offer of her own accord. She was carrying a plastic bag; they had given her the clothes she had modeled that day. The folks at the department store had also found her several outfits to match a variety of settings and occasions.

“There is no need,” she responded. “hIEs are conglomerations of sensors. If a security hIE were near me for an extended period of time, they would be able to discern information regarding your place of residence, owner.”

“Well, okay, but it’s not like they’re going to use that information to do anything bad,” Arato said.

Lacia’s pale blue eyes were expressionless. “The data would be transmitted to a security company,” she said.

Arato started to ask what that had to do with anything when he remembered the night they’d met; Lacia had been dragged into combat as soon as she’d met him. He doubted that she put much trust

in security companies.

“Well, we can always ask them to come if things start looking dangerous,” he concluded.

It was an April evening, and the sun was still quick to go down. A 3D image floated above the sunset-dyed road, informing them that a vehicle would pass by in forty seconds. They stepped to the side of the narrow street, letting the slow-moving car pass them by.

“You were really amazing today, Lacia,” Arato told her. She was still the same Lacia she had been that morning, but he felt like a new distance had opened between them.

“I have not changed at all,” she disagreed, syncing her steps up to walk beside him.

Just feeling her there by his side made Arato draw in a sharp breath; it was different from just looking at her. When Lacia was beside him, she was in all his senses. Awareness of her dominated his thoughts. She smelled good.

“You’re wearing perfume,” he said.

“This is the latest summer scent from Dior.” A shy blush crept up her cheeks.

Arato felt his own cheeks getting hot in response. “It’s good on you,” he admitted. “No surprise there.”

After the danger of their first meeting, the two hadn’t done much walking outside together. But, to Arato, Lacia was already a fundamental part of his daily life. It was to the point where he almost had trouble remembering what life was like before her.

Feeling awkward, Arato started to walk a bit ahead of her, but Lacia grabbed his sleeve to stop him. “Are you distancing yourself from me?” she asked, concerned.

“Well, you’re the Grand Prix winner,” he pointed out. “I know that I’m your owner and all, but I’m starting to feel like it’d be a bad thing to think of you as only belonging to me.” Arato would have never believed that he could feel this way about her, up until he had tagged along to her first job.

Bathed in the gentle light of the setting sun, Lacia brushed her hand through her light violet hair. The motion was the same as one Arato had seen her use during the show. He momentarily forgot how to speak, and Lacia gave a gentle laugh.

“If the fact that I gave a show for everyone disturbs you, then I will give a show just for you, owner.”

It was the same old path home Arato always took, but with Lacia there, it made his heart soar.

As they drew closer to the apartment, they ran into a crowd of people in the street. There were three police cars parked there, and officers in uniforms were stretching ‘DO NOT ENTER’ tape around the

area. When they arrived at the scene, Arato saw a female officer handling the onlookers. Arato asked a nearby, friendly-looking middle aged man what had happened.

“Someone busted up an hIE,” the man told him.

Whoever was going around destroying hIEs, they had been near Arato’s apartment. He remembered the arm he had found on the way home from school and felt sick. With Lacia by his side, he suddenly felt danger all around them, and his skin broke out in goosebumps before he could regain control of his emotions.

“How come the cops are making such a big deal of it this time?” the man Arato was talking to asked, to no one in particular.

Arato could feel something strange about the situation too, but couldn’t put his finger on it. The tension of the scene was heavy enough to prickle his skin. There were even news crews there with camera units. Then, Arato realized what was wrong with this scenario.

“Hey,” he said. “How come there are police here this time? This is completely different from how they treated that other case.” hIE were machines. When he had turned in the arm from the last case, everyone had treated it like he’d stumbled onto a troubling piece of trash.

Lacia responded to the question that had dawned on him. “This time, the owner was with the hIE. Apparently the owner was injured while attempting to protect the hIE.”

“Someone got hurt? That sounds pretty serious,” Arato said.

“Three adult males exited a large white vehicle in this area, and attempted to abduct a female hIE. The hIE’s owner, who was accompanying her, offered resistance. As a result, the owner was beaten and received light injuries that are projected to be healed within the week,” Lacia said.

“As soon as a human gets injured, everyone starts taking it seriously,” Arato said. “Unlike what happens when an hIE gets busted.” Humans weren’t machines, after all; everyone else accepted this difference automatically. But Arato couldn’t bring himself to make that kind of distinction in his mind.

“Do not worry. The hIE is also in good condition,” Lacia said.

Arato was curious as to how Lacia knew all this information, but decided not to pursue the topic. With her enhanced senses, she could have been eavesdropping on the conversations between the police officers.

The female officer standing nearby looked over at them. “That officer is an hIE,” Lacia said. “She is recording audio and video information from the area.” All hIEs made recordings of what they saw and heard, but police specifically used their hIE recordings to check for any suspicious persons in the area of a crime.

Arato didn’t feel like he had anything to feel guilty about, but for

some reason the idea of being recorded by the police put him on edge. Suddenly, he heard someone clicking their tongue loudly nearby; a man who had been about to apologize for touching the police tape realized he was talking to an hIE, and snatched back his hand. He then shoved past Arato's shoulder and left the crowd.

Lacia had an expression on her face that said she had picked up on something.

"Owner, should we consider the enmity demonstrated by that man just now to be a normal response? I have analyzed all statements made by him recently. He should have had sufficient information and understanding to realize that the officer there was an hIE," she said.

"Then why did he act like that?" Arato asked.

"He was misled by the image of a police officer projected by the hIE; in other words, analog hacked. But he reacted with anger to this hacking."

"That makes sense."

"As an hIE model complicit in analog hacking, I wonder how much we should worry about my hacking creating people who feel enmity toward me," Lacia said with an anxious look.

Something caught in Arato's chest, though he had no idea what it was. "It'll all work out," he reassured her. "If something happens, I'll be there to protect you. I am your owner, after all."

He wanted to calm her fears, even though he knew she had no heart to tremble.

Not everyone treated hIEs well, and some people even despised them. Arato could feel their hate radiating from the scene. Kengo and Ryo had told him not to get involved with Lacia, but he felt like he had to do the manly thing.

"Owners should always be responsible for their hIEs. So if it starts to feel dangerous, just quit. I'll do all the apologizing for you," he said. Lacia had no soul. Therefore, Arato thought, she could do no wrong. Probably.

Kengo Suguri was upset; he had received a sudden request for escape routes. The group had only been supposed to grab an hIE and bust her up, but instead they'd ended up beating on some guy.

"What the hell are those guys thinking?" Biting back his own voice, Kengo folded his hands in front of a stationary terminal. When he stuck his finger into the 3D display, anything he said would be taken as audio commands.

"Give me all the positional data you have on the police in Edogawa ward," he said. "Also, I'd like to speak with someone above me, so send out an encryption code. This whole thing is above my pay

grade.”

The Antibody Network Kengo was part of was a group driven by an interconnection of evil wills. For example, a single member might upload the location of an hIE walking by itself in a place where people couldn't see to the network. That act alone was not illegal.

But then a group of people full of hate would gather with weapons. Though hIEs were bundles of sensory and recording equipment, there were plenty of ways to render these ineffective if you just knew how.

Then, different people who only vaguely knew what had happened would upload information on the movements of police cars in the area to the network. All they had to do was point their pocket terminals in the right direction; it was no trouble at all. And that was how the culprits slipped away.

The Antibody Network was a defensive wall, holding back the analog hacking that had been eroding human will ever since hIEs had started wearing human figures. They were all volunteers, each connected by an evil intent which none of them could deny.

Kengo was one of the members in charge of distributing information to the enthusiastic executioners of the group. He was also one of the few members in the network who took on jobs that could actually get him arrested, so he worked alone, isolated in his room. This was his way of stopping the hIE erosion of human society.

On his screen, facilities provided by the Antibody Network were shown on a regional map. Kengo pointed to a shop near the waterfront with his finger. The system automatically calculated a safe route for movement based on the current position of the police and their probable search areas. Even a group of amateur criminals could outmaneuver the police if enough of them pooled their capabilities. There were even some police in Kengo's group; they were officers who felt that hIE were edging humans out of jobs in their department.

“Everyone, after you've passed the next two traffic lights, go another thirty meters and then get out of the vehicle. There aren't any cameras watching that spot. Once you're out, put the vehicle on auto-mode and send it to the coordinates I show you.” Kengo's words, now converted to text, were sent to the criminals.

The response came as a text to Kengo's pocket terminal. < Thanks. We owe you. >

A shiver ran up Kengo's spine at the friendly message. He didn't feel guilty about the things he did for the Network, but that evening in Shin Koito, a real human had been hurt. The people he was helping at that moment were guilty of assault.

“Savages,” he muttered. But the Antibody Network needed savages like them to outsource all the dangerous work to. “Don't

bother feeling indebted, you savages.”

The other day, on his way home from school with some friends, Kengo had seen a torn-off hIE arm. It was definitely the work of the Antibody Network. Kengo had guided a group of savages, their eyes filled with hate, to the place where they destroyed that hIE.

It was very possible that the Antibody Network could someday attack the hIE that Arato had picked up. An order could come along from someone up the chain of command in the Network to do just that. Kengo didn't want to think too much about what to do when his own friend's property got involved.

As he glared at the 3D display in front of him, he heard footsteps from behind. A hesitant voice called out from the other side of his traditional sliding screen door. “Kengo, dinner.”

Kengo's home was an eatery in Azuma-bashi called Sunflower. It had a prestigious fiftyyear history. There were twenty-eight seats in the restaurant. The whole place had a relaxed atmosphere, where customers could enjoy the western-style cooking that Kengo's dad had practiced in much larger restaurants.

But the times were changing. Most of the restaurants around Kengo's house used hIEs for employees. Some of them even had the hIEs doing the cooking.

Kengo's mom and little sister were sitting in the family dining room adjoining the restaurant when Kengo came out. Though her hair was a rich blonde, Kengo's mother spoke fluent Japanese as she chastised him. “Kengo, you must always be on time for meals.”

His mother, Veronika, had been a foreign exchange student from Russia. She had passed her looks on to Kengo's little sister, Olga, while Kengo himself looked more like his father.

“Where's dad?” Kengo ventured to ask. His mom tended to go quiet when anyone brought up the store.

Instead, his honey-haired sister answered in a mumble. “He's in the restaurant. Hey, how come we don't get hIEs? If we left them in charge of the shop, dad could come eat with us.”

“Just because everyone else is doing it doesn't mean we have to,” Kengo said.

That night, dinner was fried food that was almost too professional. Their dad's fried dishes were delicious, with crisp, crunchy skin. Kengo could hear loud laughter from the restaurant. Even though they didn't serve alcohol, there were always customers who got noisy.

“Is dad gonna be all right?” Kengo asked no one in particular. His dad was an old-fashioned chef who really loved working with customers. The recent downward trend in customer etiquette was having an impact on his mental state.

This was one of the negative effects of analog hacking. People

were so used to their servers being nothing more than food-making machines these days, that they had forgotten polite cultural norms that used to be common sense. No one complimented the chef anymore, or bothered to say ‘thank you.’

Normal exchanges between human hearts had easily grown rusty.

The commotion from the restaurant showed no sign of stopping. It wasn’t the kind of place that could depend on familiar regulars; tourists to the Sky Tree area and students came there often.

Kengo’s mom stood up from the table. “I’m going to go check on the restaurant,” she said. Then it was just Kengo and his sister.

“Kengo,” Olga asked curiously, “do you not want us to get an hIE?”

“Those aren’t cure-alls for every problem we have,” he said. “They’re just like human-shaped cars.”

hIEs were just like cars. Now that cars drove themselves, all a person needed to do was sit down and let the car do the driving. Human movement had become automatic, and hIEs were the same. They were human-shaped, so it was easy for them to fit into human society, and the range of work they could automate for the humans was wide. That was all there was to them.

That was all there was to them, which was exactly why the Network had to keep the hIEs from taking the world away from humans. The precious and nostalgic feelings that lived under the roof of his father’s shop could only thrive in a place where humans could still exchange their emotions. That was the reason Kengo had joined the Antibody Network.

“You like saying that everything is like a car, Kengo,” Olga said.

When Arato had said the same thing earlier, Kengo had felt like punching him, but he couldn’t get angry hearing it in Olga’s gentle voice. “So you think so too, huh?” he sighed.

“And you don’t have to get all philosophical on me,” Olga added.

“Sorry about that.”

They heard a creaking noise from upstairs and Olga, always an anxious girl, looked at him nervously.

“Guess I’ll eat first,” he said.

He ate what he could, and Olga offered to wash up afterward. While she was doing that, Kengo headed upstairs to the second floor. He hadn’t been able to enjoy dinner due to the twisting feeling in his gut. Sending that information to the other members of the Antibody Network earlier had made him an accomplice in a crime.

Their sixty-year-old wooden house only had two wireless power plugs, so all the terminals in the house were wired. The lights were wired too, and weren’t being controlled by the house system.

This meant that there was no way to know if anyone had snuck

into Kengo's room. Despite this, what was waiting for Kengo when he opened the sliding screen to his room was far beyond anything he could have imagined.

It was a girl, wearing an almost ridiculously sturdy-looking bodysuit. She had accessories like the ears of a beast in her red hair, and her big, red eyes were smoldering with inner light. There were visible seams on places where her pale skin showed. The large metal device she had left nearby was so heavy that the floor was bowing underneath it; that explained the creaking noise from earlier.

The window was wide open. With the moon at her back, the girl gave him a smile that showed her white teeth. She was obviously enjoying herself.

"Who are you?" Kengo asked. He tried to add some heat to his voice, but it trembled.

"I'd shut that screen if I were you," she said.

Kengo hurriedly stepped inside and slid the screen shut behind himself, without taking his eyes off of her. There was something horrible in his room; no human could have carried the heavy device that she'd brought.

Whatever it was, it was obviously the girl's weapon. Kengo had never seen a blade of such a ludicrous size; it must have been over a meter long. But there was also a gun-like extension from the back of the device that appeared to be a laser cannon. Kengo couldn't predict exactly how powerful an output it had, but size-wise it was bigger than the main gun of a military tank.

If the girl decided to go crazy with that weapon, Kengo's house would be a pile of rubble in three seconds.

"What the hell. What the hell is going on?" Kengo asked. His only thought was that one of the volunteers from the Antibody Network must be involved. Nothing else made sense. He had checked out some information on current humanoid military drones and their equipment out of curiosity before, but he had never heard of a drone with this level of heavy armament.

The 'girl' started operating Kengo's terminal, despite the password lock he kept on it. Her hair accessory was giving off a faint glow.

Even though she hadn't actually touched it, the terminal expanded its 3D display, and programs started popping open almost faster than Kengo could follow with his eyes.

"Hmm. So that's the signal my sister's been sending out," the girl said. There was a graph on the screen. Kengo recognized it as the unit code he had gotten from Lacia.

"That machine is your 'sister'? Are you an hIE?" Kengo asked. Even knowing that all hIE conversations and actions were based on instructions from the cloud, Kengo found what the girl said too

strange. It was almost like she, a machine, had some kind of special feelings toward Lacia, who was another machine.

“Say something, please. Why is there a heavily armed hIE in my room?” Kengo asked.

“My name is Kouka,” she said. “I’ve come from higher up the Antibody Network.”

The Antibody Network was a group of human volunteers trying to protect humanity from the erosion of society with their own hands. The thought of even that group outsourcing their work to an hIE was the height of irony. Kengo’s tiny senses of duty and justice were completely dwarfed by the immensity of the issue before his eyes, and his emotions were so confused that he felt like crying.

He had no idea about the whole story of the Antibody Network he was a part of.

The Endos had fried shrimp for breakfast.

“Woah,” Yuka said, swinging her legs back and forth under her chair. “Oh, hey, speaking of fried shrimp, the stuff over at Kengo’s family’s place is amazing. You should take me over there to eat again.”

“Are you aiming to be the most spoiled kid ever or something?” Arato asked.

“It’ll be a reward for me taking care of the apartment while you’re out,” Yuka said. Without a shred of hesitation, she reached out her chopsticks to steal a shrimp from Arato’s plate. He attempted to take some of hers in return, but her plate was already empty; Yuka was the type to eat her food in order of preference.

Lacia had already finished her work in the kitchen, so she took a seat with them. It was a breakfast scene that had become standard over the last week, but there was something different about it that day.

It had been awkward talking to Lacia on the way home. When they arrived home there had been a sense of relief, but for some reason Arato suddenly found it hard to even look straight at her.

He had tried to strike up a conversation with her a few times, but he would always turn to Yuka instead at the last minute. He felt a strange sense of inferiority, as an ordinary high school student comparing himself to an up-and-coming model.

And just when he needed her to step up, Yuka had stopped talking to Lacia, as well. Arato wished she would take responsibility. She was the one who had brought about this whole modeling thing, after all.

“Hey, say something to Lacia,” Arato told his sister.

“Lacia, you were super cool in that shoot,” Yuka said.

"I saw it, too. You really were amazing," Arato said, following Yuka's lead. He wanted to add something more. The shame of his own pathetic nature made him want to grab his head in despair.

Lacia's cool, pale blue eyes met Arato's. She had just gotten back from a photo shoot, so there was a touch of makeup on her lips. Just that little bit of added glossiness made Arato's breath catch. Things he wanted to say to her bubbled up inside, but he couldn't get them out of his mouth. It was as if he was unconsciously trying to build an invisible wall between them. He felt completely unreasonable.

"Owner." Arato thought his heart would explode when Lacia suddenly spoke to him.

"Yes!" he burst out in reply.

"Good grief, Arato. Calm down with the puppy dog impression," Yuka said.

That evening, there was a light knock at the door to Arato's room. He had just been settling down to sleep, so he was a bit irritated when he went and opened the door.

Lacia was standing there, dressed in pajamas that she had just bought that day. "Owner, would you like to have some tea with me?" she asked. In the end it was she who invited him, and so easily.

"Man, I'm a moron," Arato said.

"Has your body warmed up?" Lacia asked, making up some black tea in a pot. She had picked out some spices at the store that day, so she was actually making a special chai blend.

hIE did not act of their own accord. They simply repeated behaviors they pulled from the control cloud. Even Arato understood that. But thinking of how Lacia moved and looked when she was in model mode, he couldn't help but feel nervous.

"I understand that humans as young as you are have trouble with changes in your own emotions, owner," Lacia said.

"Don't say it like I'm a little kid. I really don't know how I'm supposed to act right now," Arato said. Her prominent collar bones did a good job of drawing his eyes toward her chest. Before his brain could even register that he was enjoying a nice view, he'd broken out in a cold sweat.

Lacia walked over to stand next to him, while he remained seated in his chair. "Owner," she said, "would you please stand up?"

"Of course," Arato said. He stood, and Lacia was right there by his side. Her sweet scent made his brain go fuzzy.

"I have begun to work as a model, but because of that there is awkwardness in our relationship, owner. I believe we have gotten things out of order," she told him. "I believe if we do not alter the way in which we feel about each other, we may not be able to handle sudden changes in our situation."

“What do you mean ‘alter’ the way we feel?” Arato asked. Or at least, he tried to. Lacia’s hand covered his mouth, and only a mumble escaped.

“For the next five minutes, I will change the nature of my communication with you, owner,” she said.

Arato had no idea what she was talking about. He tried to free himself from her thin arms with both hands, but she didn’t budge. Considering that she could lift her giant coffin-like device with a single hand, she obviously possessed incredible strength.

“Please be quiet. You will awaken Lady Yuka again,” Lacia said, holding a finger in front of her lips. Her pajamas were in a bit of disarray from Arato’s struggling. She must have noticed where he was looking, because she pulled her collar back into place with her fingers.

“Some hIE users seek a certain kind of excitement. What I am about to do is just a little game. Don’t worry, I’ll go back to how I was before when it’s over,” she said. Then she whispered: “Close your eyes.”

Arato shut his eyes as he was told. When he opened them, he felt a stab of confusion.

The girl in front of him no longer looked like Lacia. Her eyes were open a little wider than normal, and there was a gentle smile on her lips. The expression on her face made her seem younger.

“Hey, wait a minute. What the heck is going on?” Arato said, trying to laugh it off. But in an instant, he felt cold sweat on his back.

Lacia was right there in front of him, but his senses were telling him this was a person he’d never met before. Her expression and the way she stood and moved had completely changed. This girl couldn’t even pass for Lacia’s twin.

“Just as you like spoiling Yuka, I’ll spoil you today, Arato,” she said. Her manner of speaking, from her intonation to her accent and word choice, had all changed as well. Arato couldn’t perceive her as anything but a different person. Yet strangely, he felt no desire to stop her. It was probably due to the perverse excitement he felt at the thought of a secret encounter like this, kept quiet so as not to wake his sleeping sister.

“All right, go ahead and spoil me,” he said. Even as the words left his mouth, he felt a pang of self-loathing. He had no idea what was about to happen, but even that fact just made things all the more exciting to the point where he didn’t really care anymore.

“Leave it to me,” she said. Though she was shorter than him, Lacia reached out her arm and started stroking Arato’s head. It was strange, being treated like a child, but to be fair Arato did the same thing to Yuka all the time.

Getting his head stroked was something Arato hadn’t experienced

in years, and it sent a strange, ticklish sensation through his body. It also made guilt well up within him. He felt a rush of confusion and surprise, like he had suddenly been tugged into a dance he didn't know. This was reality, not some story he was experiencing, so he had no idea what to do with his body.

"What am I supposed to do while you spoil me?" Arato asked. His cheeks were red, and he felt his brain switching off more and more with each passing second.

"Oh, you're doing just fine. How about you lay your head on my lap and think of what else you'd like me to do," Lacia said.

"Uh, I don't think we're ready to go there yet. Actually, wait, let me think about it," Arato said. His throat felt dry. Did they really have that kind of relationship? Arato knew the answer to that question. This wasn't real. It was just a lie that had started a few minutes ago.

When he thought that, Arato felt his chest tighten, and he clenched the back of his jaw unconsciously. Arato knew Lacia would switch from the way she had treated him up to then, and treat him like this from now on. All he needed to do was ask.

She had no heart, no soul. All she was doing was performing actions drawn from the behavioral cloud. So it would be nothing for her to continue to perform this lie perfectly for as long as he wanted. All the sides of Lacia Arato had seen; the Lacia who rescued him, the Lacia who invited him out onto the school roof, the Lacia who posed for models shoots, they may as well have been illusions.

Lacia herself had told him these truths countless times. But the thought that the personality and characteristics that Arato had started to see as precious were all just window dressing that Lacia could toss aside in an instant came as a shock. It was like walking in a dream, only to be shoved off a ledge. He didn't know where to put his feet, and every breath brought pleasure and pain.

After pulling out a chair with both hands, Lacia sat down quickly. She gently turned up the hem of her pajamas, then let out a short, breathy laugh and patted her thighs. "If you lay your head on my lap," she invited, "your whole world may change."

This girl had no soul. The perfection with which she acted out this new relationship made a shiver run up Arato's spine. She felt nothing of the fact that there was no trace of the Lacia he knew in the way she was acting now.

"Let's stop. This is embarrassing," Arato said, feeling himself being drawn out of the moment. Lacia wasn't a human; even the fact that she appeared to be human was nothing more than an illusion.

In response, Lacia showed him a bittersweet smile he had never seen before. "Is that any way to talk to your big sister?" she said. "That's what you've always wanted, right? A big sister."

“You used the home system to look at my album,” he accused. “Didn’t you?”

“What’s wrong with that? As your big sister, I just wanted to know more about you, Arato,” she said. Lacia’s gaze was full of deep affection. With that much love being sent in his direction, Arato started to think maybe it was all right to get a little spoiled.

He made his decision. “Oh, okay, I guess I can rest on your lap,” he said.

“The five minutes are almost up. Would you like an extension?” Lacia asked.

“I’m the worst.” Arato was so embarrassed, he wanted to hide his face behind both hands and disappear. Was this all just his frustrated sexual desire coming out, or was he just lonely? He felt like he was seeing his own evil twin in a mirror.

“I’m sorry, I got carried away,” Lacia said. She tugged on his hand. When he stood up, they were face-to-face.

Arato didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know who he was talking to; the Lacia he remembered, or ‘big sis’ Lacia. His words were a jumble, stuck inside his head. He felt like he was talking to a human-shaped wall. In his mind, he doubted whether or not she was real. But her shape, her warmth, the way she breathed; all of it overwhelmed his doubt.

“Do you still feel the need to distance yourself from me?” Lacia asked.

It did feel like something had been broken down, and the air between them was suddenly less stagnant. But, even as Arato felt that, somewhere inside he could tell that it had happened because Lacia had pushed things in that direction.

Arato wasn’t very bright, but he finally noticed what had happened. “You analog hacked me,” he said.

“Yes. I believe taking on the work of a model and thereby causing distance to form between you and I was a miscalculation of priorities, Arato,” she said, responding in the manner he had gotten used to. Her expression, too, was that of the Lacia he had met that first night. At last her meaning and her form had returned to their original balance, and Arato felt relieved. The only thing that hadn’t gone back to normal was her calling him ‘owner.’

“You’re not going to call me owner anymore?” he asked.

“You gave a very positive reaction to being called by name, so I altered it,” Lacia said.

It didn’t make Arato feel bad at all. In fact, he was actually happy about it. Which, in turn, made him depressed at how easily swayed he was. “Man, I’m easy to please,” he sighed. Since he had become Lacia’s owner, at least there was something new every day. She kept

snapping effortlessly through everything he had taken for granted in his life.

The next morning, everything that had happened the night before still filled his head. When he was with her, he felt like he was going to be swept away by his own intense emotions, but when they were apart, the loneliness suddenly scared him. That morning, his awakening was horrible. He was still seeing constant nightmares but, ever since he'd met Lacia, the content of the dreams had changed.

What the heck did I become the owner of? That was the question jumbling around in Arato's head. Were all hIEs just like that? Or did this have something to do with Lacia being high quality, as her ID number seemed to indicate? Was her ID number even legitimate, or was that fake, too?

Just like his friends had said, maybe his whole meeting with Lacia had been some kind of urban legend come to life; that almost seemed to be the most likely answer. The thought that, someday, this strangeness would consume his whole life, and even Yuka would start speaking to him with a different voice and wearing a different face, made his skin crawl.

"I need to tell her never to do that again," he said. He knew things couldn't go on exactly the same forever, but he wanted at least tomorrow and the next day to be the same.

He wiped off his sweat from the night with a towel left by his bedside, and headed out to the living room. Breakfast was all laid out, but no one was there. Yuka was on trash duty that morning.

"She's having Lacia help her again," Arato said. Since Lacia had arrived they didn't let the trash pile up anymore like they had before, but on the flip-side, Yuka had gotten very dishonest about doing her chores by herself.

Suddenly, from below he heard the screeching of brakes and a loud slamming noise; for him to have heard it all the way up on the fifth floor, it must have been big.

Breakfast that morning was Japanese-style, the same as always, with Lacia carefully balancing out their nutritional needs. Arato had just dipped out some pork broth and brown rice into two bowls when the door slammed open.

Yuka came running in. "Arato! Come quick! Lacia j-just got hit! Some weird car hit her!"

Yuka was crying, and Arato felt like someone had just doused him in freezing water. He had a good idea what was happening. Things had just gotten very dangerous.

"Sh-she got knocked down and s-some guy took her away," Yuka stammered.

Arato couldn't believe it, and turned to look. Lacia's black coffin

was still in the living room where she normally left it. Lacia had left her weapon behind.

The breakfast on the table was steaming. Everything still looked the same. But suddenly, something was missing. Just like with Lacia the night before, form and meaning shifting apart, and Arato fought the urge to vomit.

Phase3 「You'll Be Mine」

In the time between two breaths, Arato was already moving. He ran, his body moving before he could even form a solid thought in his mind. In an instant he was out onto the apartment veranda, looking down at the street below.

The car that had hit Lacia and then taken her away was nowhere to be seen. Only after noticing this did Arato realize that he didn't know the model or color of the vehicle he was looking for.

"What kind of car was it?" Arato asked.

Yuka looked at him, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I don't know! All I remember is it was white," she said. Then, sitting on the floor like a small child, Yuka hid her face in both hands and trembled.

"Okay. It's okay. I'll figure something out," Arato said.

The blank space in their ordinary lives from where Lacia had been torn away seemed to be looming larger and larger with each passing second. He called the police, and navigated the automated guide of the emergency contact line until it connected him with the department in charge of theft. The officer on the other end informed him someone would be by in the evening, since this was an hIE theft case.

"They just carried her off. If you went after them right now, you might catch them," Arato said.

The middle-aged male officer on the other end of the line seemed sympathetic but his response was firm. 〈We're talking about an hIE. It's a theft. I know this thing looks like a human, but it's a machine. We can't treat it the same as a kidnapping. Did the thieves enter your home? Is anyone hurt? I can go ahead and get a damage report from your network, okay? Mr. Endo? I'll go ahead and record your address, contact information, image and voice data now, all right?〉

Hearing the officer talking about Lacia as if she was just a machine, Arato felt like he had been stabbed right through the heart, and he struggled to breathe. Haltingly, he gave the officer a description of Lacia, as well as her unit code, as he was asked for them. He also sent over an image of her.

Arato saw a small sub-window pop up on the call screen, with a simple hIE theft form. If he had theft insurance, apparently they could contact the insurance company and the hIE dealer. Of course, since Arato had found Lacia on the street, he had neither insurance nor a

dealer.

“Is that it?” he asked.

〈I’ve entered this case into our database, and we’ll contact you immediately if we find her. hIE go walking around outside by themselves a lot, so there are a ton of cases of people nabbing them. Sorry, but there’s really nothing you can do but wait.〉 The officer hung up, and Arato was left in the silence of the living room.

“There’s no way I’m gonna leave it at that,” he said. Thinking back over the conversation he’d just had made his blood boil. Angrily, he took two or three shaky steps. He heard a faint sniffing from somewhere below him.

Yuka was still on the floor crying. She seemed to be blaming herself for Lacia being taken when they were together. She looked at Arato with red-rimmed eyes, and he reached out to ruffle her hair, careful not to scratch her with his fingernails.

“This isn’t your fault. I’m going to get her back, so don’t worry,” he said.

“Arato,” Yuka whined. She looked up at him, fighting back tears.

“I’ll get Lacia back, so you just get to school,” he said. If they couldn’t depend on the police, then Arato would just have to be the dependable one. Of course, he had no idea how to track down a car that had fled the scene over 10 minutes ago. He knew he wouldn’t come up with something just sitting around and thinking, though, so he just had to move.

“I need you to do what I can’t,” Arato said.

“Okay,” she said. At times like this, Yuka was good at honestly listening to his directions. With tears still shining on her face, she grabbed her own knees and stood. Then, she went over to the table where Lacia had prepared her last meal for them. “I’ll eat this all in your place, then,” she said solemnly.

“What?” Arato blinked in surprise as Yuka started to slurp down pork broth. She ate so fast, it seemed like she thought Lacia would return if she just finished breakfast.

Of course there was really nothing else Yuka could do just then. Having been told she would eat his portion for him, Arato found it too awkward to reach out for the still steaming food on the table.

“Just make sure you go to school,” he said.

Either way, the emotions bubbling up inside of him seemed like they would lead to an upset stomach if he tried to eat. While he changed into his school uniform, he called up their home assistant AI and started creating a list of items around the house that might help him. Thanks to the tags each item in the house had, the system could show him useful objects even if Arato had never used them before, or even knew they were there. By aiming his pocket terminal’s camera

around, the positions of useful objects were shown as red dots.

He found what he was looking for lying around in his dad's room; it was a pair of terminal goggles. They would be more convenient to use than having his pocket terminal in his hands while he ran around.

Arato slipped on the goggles and turned them on. A check pattern appeared, so the goggles could project images directly onto his retina. Once he linked the goggles up with his pocket terminal, his viewpoint was a mix of natural vision and a computer screen. In the upper-left of his field of vision, a timer counted the time since Lacia had been taken. It had been 14 minutes.

"Okay, here we go," Arato said. He said good bye to Yuka and took off. Once he was out of the apartment, it finally clicked in his brain that he wouldn't be able to chase a car on foot.

He searched around nearby until he found a single-person fully-automatic rental car, and rented it for the day with his allowance. Arato wasn't too good at thinking, but he at least knew his own limits. While he walked to where the rental car was, he contacted his friends.

〈What's the matter?〉 Kengo's sleepy bed-head appeared in the middle of Arato's view. Since he lived close to school, Kengo must have just been waking up.

〈A little early for a call, isn't it?〉 Ryo was already dressed for school. He had all his buttons done up, which was oddly rigid for him.

Arato spoke desperately to his friends' images on his goggles display. "Please help me," he said. He had only known her for a month, but Arato already felt Lacia was a vital part of his life. He had to get her back. So, he would take any help he could get.

The automatic car he'd rented didn't even take three minutes to track him down by his pocket terminal's ID tag. It came rolling over to where he was waiting. Arato ran over to the curb where it was parked and jumped in. There was a chime as the rental fee was automatically deducted from his tag.

"How much money do I have anyway?" he wondered. His terminal decided this was a verbal command, and displayed Arato's current bank account balance on his retinal display. It was low enough to make his shoulders slump.

〈Well, whatever. Did you read the manual? High-end hIEs should have stuff in there about what to do if they're stolen,〉 Kengo's sleepy image said.

Arato had explained the situation while settling into the seat of the rental car. The first response from his friends was useless.

Ryo seemed to have noticed something, and asked a question.

〈Hey, come to think of it, did she even come with a manual?〉

"No," Arato said.

〈What? Why?〉

“Lacia said she had the whole thing in her memory anyway,” Arato said.

Ryo sighed. 〈It’s nice that you’re so pure-hearted, Arato, but it’s dangerous to be this defenseless. You have the security memory stick, right? If you stick that into your terminal, it’ll activate the hIE security mode and link you up with a support line from the company that made her.〉

“I just found her on the street. Obviously, she didn’t come with all the normal peripherals,” Arato said.

The car was requesting a destination through the goggle terminal. Arato didn’t know where he wanted it to go, but he couldn’t just sit around in a stopped car. He randomly picked somewhere in the port area where there wouldn’t be many people on the map on his retinal display. The car slowly pulled out onto the street and gently accelerated.

Ryo, through the call, was still going on about getting support from the manufacturer. 〈We know her unit code, so use that to connect with the supplier,〉 he said.

Arato remembered the name of the high-end hIE company that, according to Ryo, had made Lacia, and opened up their site on the network. Stylus’s homepage glittered with polish, their slogan, “Beyond human,” displayed prominently.

After calling up the support desk through the site, Arato sent Lacia’s unit ID through the goggles terminal. He never could have predicted the response he got. 〈The owner of this unit has opted to have this unit reject all owner-level commands from our company.〉

“What? Why? That’s stupid,” Arato said.

〈As a countermeasure against hacking, many owners utilize the full privacy mode for their units. You may disengage this function, as the owner. The procedure will take half a day.〉

Arato huffed out a breath and slumped into the chair of the self-driving car. Thinking that in a half a day Lacia might be damaged or broken beyond repair, his eyes grew hot. He slid the AR goggles up on his forehead.

Even though he couldn’t see the screen, his bone conduction speakers still functioned. The camera function on the goggles was cut when he pushed them up, but his friends could still hear him.

〈What’s the matter, Arato?〉

〈Don’t just drop off screen all of a sudden like that. It messes things up on our side.〉

“Sorry. The company said she’s been set up to reject my commands. They won’t be able to fix that for half a day,” Arato said. He had no idea what to think about this information. The car was still moving, taking him somewhere random.

Kengo flipped out. 〈I'm seriously surprised you've managed to trust that machine at all. Doesn't any of this freak you out?〉 he asked.

Ryo's voice sounded calmer once Arato couldn't see him on his retinal display. 〈I don't think you should go after her. These guys went to a lot of trouble to grab that hIE. Even if you find her, you have no idea what they might do to keep her,〉 he said.

〈I'm telling you, this is ghost story territory. That machine you've got is like a walking urban legend. You've heard stories about broken hIEs coming back and haunting people, right? It's like that. I mean, those stories are stupid, but this machine's a horror story waiting to happen,〉 Kengo added.

While listening to his friends' advice, Arato clenched his fist and tapped it against his own ribs. Sure, Lacia was a mystery, but she was suffering right then. Arato was getting caught up in something crazy, and he was going to fix things in a way that was probably even crazier. But if he didn't explain how he felt properly, he knew his friends wouldn't help him.

He slid the goggles back over his eyes. "Sorry. I know you guys have all kinds of stuff you want to say to me, but I'm going to save Lacia," he said. Then he bowed low, bending his body in half.

"I'm begging you guys," he went on. "I may not know a thing about Lacia, but I do know she's like family to me." He was worried about how his friends would respond. Still, even if they said 'no,' he would just do it himself. No matter how long it took.

Ryo scrubbed a hand through his bangs and sighed. 〈Don't you think you're using the word 'family' too lightly here?〉 he asked.

"Yuka's sobbing her eyes out about this, too. I can't just let them take Lacia," Arato said.

He waited, and finally Kengo gave a slight nod. 〈Well, if you're going to take it that far, I guess I can help. But I can only think of one way to do this,〉 he said. Then he said he needed to get his machine ready and stood up, still in his nightshirt.

"So you know a way?" Arato asked, a little more sharply than he intended.

Kengo's response was off-hand. 〈I'm not going to make any promises. I'm just going to try to trace that hIE unit code we got off of her before,〉 he said.

"I don't care about promises! Whatever you can do is fine. Thanks," Arato said.

Kengo must have been putting his password into his machine, since his visual feed cut to voice-only. 〈But the criminals who do these kinds of things tend to keep the hIE shielded so they can't broadcast their unit codes. All they need to do is drape a sack made of

shielding fiber over her top half and her code won't be able to get out, > he said.

Then he continued, with a hint of disappointment in his voice. < Well, I'm getting a response. They're certainly taking their sweet time. The map says they're heading from Kasai toward Urayasu, > he said.

Arato's goggles interpreted Kengo's statement, and asked Arato if he would like to see a map. He focused his gaze on the < OK > icon, and a map popped up in front of him, with his own position at the center.

"I'm actually headed for Kasai already," Arato said. He'd just stabbed his finger at a random place where there wouldn't be many people, never guessing that his random shot would be a bullseye.

As his vehicle headed south from Shin Koiwa, the buildings around Arato became scarce; a huge portion of the Tokyo Bay area of the city had been lost during the last century due to the liquefaction of the ground during the Hazard. The area between Kiba and Funabashi had been hit particularly hard, with over 30% of the buildings there being knocked over and requiring rebuilding. Plus, despite everyone insisting that it was impossible, tsunamis had rocked the bay, causing major damage. Thanks to all of that, the area had become one of the least populated in Tokyo and its suburbs.

< Hold up. I'll get the hIE's current position up on the map, > Kengo said, and sent Lacia's location to Arato's map. A blue dot was heading east, from the ruins of Kasai Rinkai Park.

"Thanks. That's a big help. I definitely couldn't have done this alone," Arato said. He'd only gotten this far because he had friends to back him up.

< Arato, you've got a talent for believing in people and asking for help. I'm actually kind of jealous of you, being able to say 'thank you' with a free conscience like that, > Kengo said.

Kengo's words made Arato feel a little embarrassed. Sticking his finger in the car's 3D display, he checked the machine's voice code. "Speed up to the speed limit," he said.

The light car accelerated rapidly on the empty road. The charge units set into the four-lane street shone, automatically charging the vehicle as it passed over them. With this evolved form of a power grid, anything that used electricity would automatically charge itself, removing any need to worry about losing power. On the flip-side, this new system required electricity bills to be paid for each individual item using a charge.

Since the solar power generators had been established in space and energy storage technology had advanced, society was rich with energy. There was no longer a need to huddle around energy sources,

so the cityscape had spread out. Especially in the bay area, where there were few houses, the view was pleasantly wide and clear.

The area Arato was passing through, near the head of the Edogawa River, had been hit the heaviest during the Hazard, with the highest number of casualties. There were many vacant homes around, and the place had become a hotbed of criminal activity. It was frequently mentioned in reports of violent incidents.

Arato's goggles made an electric noise. A man, drunk at that hour of the morning, was walking down the cracked street. He was leaning heavily on a woman whose gaudy dress showed quite a lot of skin. According to the display overlaying his vision, the woman was an hIE.

That hIE was a tool to be used. From the way the man was snuggling against her while they walked, it was clear how she was being used. A man opening up his ramen shop on the side of the main road gave the hIE's owner a disgusted look as the pair walked by.

Seeing the way the ramen shop owner looked at the guy, Arato felt a pang of guilt at his own intense desire to get back Lacia. "I'm not a total moron, you know. I get that Lacia's different. But I want her to stay with me. Do I look like the kind of loser who's just chasing after a hot piece of ass?" he asked.

An hIE would always accept the romantic advances of their owner. Even if the love of an hIE was nothing more than an analog hack, at least the owner could trust that the hIE would always love them. Arato couldn't deny that part of his obsession with Lacia was probably due to her returning his love.

On the goggles' display, Ryo dropped his eyes and laughed. 〈No, Arato, you're not a loser. You're just not the kind of guy who can let something like this slide,〉 he said.

"Yeah," Arato said. Then, after a pause, he added: "Sorry, that was weird. I wouldn't even be thinking crap like that if this whole thing hadn't happened." Friends didn't always share the same preferences. Arato just wanted to get the whole thing over with as soon as he could.

"Ryo, I'm gonna try to get ahead of the guys. Give me some guidance," Arato said.

〈If you've got any good ideas, Kaidai, let's hear 'em. I'd like to get to school in about 15 minutes, myself,〉 Kengo said.

On the map, Arato could see that he had almost caught up to Lacia's signal. The guys who took her didn't seem to have noticed they were being tailed yet, so they were still moving relatively slowly. Arato spat out a sharp breath. At some point, his forehead had gotten drenched in sweat.

Ryo gave him concise, focused directions. 〈Let's see... Let's use the Edogawa River. If the thieves keep heading east, they'll need to

cross a bridge. So, we can predict their route like this: considering the location of the bridges around the mouth of the Edogawa River, you should be able to head them off if you take one of the northern bridges. ›

The map on the car showed the route Lacia's signal was moving on. A line appeared, showing the shortest route to cut off Lacia's signal from the north.

‹ Be careful, Arato. The fact that these guys are heading cluelessly toward a one-way street over this bridge tells me they don't know the area. And if they don't know the area, it means they deliberately came here, to a place with not many people around, › Ryo said. In other words, it was possible the thieves were there to meet up with some comrades.

"That's fine. If something happens to me, call the cops for me," Arato said.

The automatic car headed toward Edogawa river across a dilapidated bridge. Since he wasn't actually driving the car, Arato couldn't accelerate or push it. So, even though his feelings were rushing, the car itself continued to move smoothly.

Urayasu had been the target of several revitalization projects, but it was still mostly deserted aside from the area around the station. At the request of the residents in the area, security cameras had been installed all around. They would automatically alert the police if they spotted anyone on their wanted list.

He was in an automatic vehicle that recharged any energy it used automatically, chasing an hIE, whose every reaction was automated. Everything was automated, so Arato could do all kinds of things at once. The only thing all that automation couldn't help with was his intense emotions.

‹ Arato, I still think you really shouldn't get involved with this hIE. They're just tools, built to do little stuff around the house for us. All this that's happening? This is way too big and complicated to be about a tool, › Ryo said.

Ryo's face, on Arato's retinal display, looked just as doubtful as Arato felt. Then, his eyes widened. ‹ Call up your home system and have it show you the inside of your apartment. Right now, › he said.

Arato did as he was told, and called up a display of the inside of the Endos' apartment. He noticed it right away. Yuka had already gone to middle school, so there was no one in the kitchen, but something that should have been there was missing. Something that usually stuck out quite plainly. Something that was Lacia's greatest mystery, which was saying something, considering that she was one big mystery herself. That huge, powerful weapon — the giant black coffin — was gone.

“What the hell. Did you know it was gone?” Arato asked, feeling a mysterious darkness behind the vanished coffin. It was heavy enough that he couldn’t shift it a single millimeter when he tried. So, seeing that it had gone was something he couldn’t even comprehend. It felt like he had been wrong about something on a fundamental level.

Ryo’s voice was trembling with tension. 〈What if that hIE is a Red Box?〉 he asked.

It was a term they had all learned in grade school. Fifty years ago, computers had reached a technological singularity that could surpass human understanding. There were thirty-nine AIs that had far surpassed the slow evolution of human brains. They were mostly used for research and development. Using new technology, those AIs created new products far beyond anything humans could grasp. These products, produced without any input from humanity, were known as ‘Red Boxes.’

“Don’t be a moron. If Lacia was one of those, what was she doing wandering around my neighborhood?” Arato asked. He felt a strange twitching in his eye. Some Red Box thing humans couldn’t even dream of making was doing housework for him, and pretending to be his ‘big sister’ in midnight snuggle sessions? His brain couldn’t handle the thought, and he felt his head getting hot.

〈We started without a single clue, but here we are already caught up to these guys thirty minutes later. Doesn’t this feel like someone orchestrated this whole thing? Like we’re just being led along some automated path by something,〉 Ryo said.

Arato began to wonder just how crazy Ryo Kaidai, his childhood friend, was going.

〈Your hIE knows about all of us. If we’re being guided, she could be part of it. You think you’re chasing after her, but she’s actually just leading you down this path. I really don’t want to think about what that hIE is trying to put in motion, if this whole thing is part of the plan,〉 Ryo said.

Thinking wasn’t his strong point, but Arato still felt a chill from Ryo’s words. “No way! Are you saying this whole kidnapping was faked?” he asked.

Kengo seemed to have trouble keeping up too. He touched his pointer finger to his forehead. 〈So, basically, the hIE wasn’t kidnapped. Instead, this whole thing was to get Endo to follow her out there, where her co-conspirators are waiting? And when Endo goes strolling in there all clueless, they’ll grab him and all we’ll hear is his scream as it all fades to black?〉 he asked in summary.

“Does everything have to turn into an urban legend with you?!” Arato shouted. That said, since it was an urban legend involving him, Arato felt cold sweat running down his back.

〈Arato, I asked someone I know who works at MemeFrame. There was an explosion a little while ago at one of our Tokyo research labs. You saw the news about it, right? Well, apparently they had to call in a PMC to handle whatever was going on there,〉 Ryo said.

Even Arato could pick up on what Ryo was implying. But the whole discussion had gotten too big for him; he was just here chasing after some kidnappers. Trying to think about the rest of it made his brain go numb.

“There’s no proof she’s related to that at all,” Arato said.

〈You found her on the same day. And around the same time, even,〉 Ryo said. He was being serious. His eyes were dark, just like the first time he had warned Arato about Lacia.

〈The explosion at our Tokyo research labs and you seeing those flowers that could control machines and meeting that hIE all happened on the same night,〉 Ryo continued.

“Saving someone is more complicated than I thought,” Arato said, forcing himself to laugh. His eyes felt weak from tension, but he clenched his teeth and kept himself coiled, ready for action. If he didn’t, he felt that he would lose in some kind of mental battle.

Lacia wasn’t a someone. She was a something. Despite that, Arato had no problem stepping into danger to get her back. He just let the automatic car continue on the route picked out based on the information and guidance his friends had given him.

The automated cityscape that spread out before and above him seemed to dwarf his high schooler’s frame. All this talk about society and Red Boxes seemed too distant for him to comprehend. Arato felt that if he didn’t focus and follow this path he’d been put on, everything would just leave him behind.

〈So you’re seriously going in there?〉 Ryo asked, sounding very worried.

Arato had good friends, and he was grateful for that, but there was only one possible answer, even for a dumb guy like him. “A girl got kidnapped, and there’s a chance I can save her before these guys do anything bad to her,” he said. “I’m not going to turn tail and run away just because of some speculation.”

“Lacia wants me to come for her,” he added. “As her owner, I’ve got to go to her.” He was scared; scared that if he didn’t keep going forward, he would always be held back by his own hesitation.

On the map, Arato’s tracking dot had already overlapped Lacia’s, and he saw a white van cut across the intersection in front of him. Lacia was in that van. The instant Arato thought that, all of his doubts were blown away.

The man had been angry his whole life. From the time of his earliest memories, he had known that the gears which moved the world were insane. He swallowed his spit over and over again, and each time he tasted salty bile, like his stomach just couldn't settle down.

This was his first time.

The thin, bracelet-shaped terminal on his wrist vibrated. When he looked at it, it was displaying a warning; there was a security sweep happening nearby. The program that was essentially a lifeline for the members of the Antibody Network, who did the dirty work of destroying hIEs, was functioning properly, but the man vented his frustration by slamming his fist against the interior of his automatic vehicle.

"Dammit!" he yelled. "This is useless without a navigator!"

The Antibody Network could only provide the barest minimum of information to its members when the information touched on things that could get people arrested. They could provide general information on the location of patrols, but without an actual navigator, there would be no specifics about how to avoid them and get away. And in this situation, the man could not rely on being provided a navigator, because he was using the Antibody Network without permission.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have shouted. I scared you. I scared you, didn't I?" the man asked. Turning around, he looked at the girl in the back seat of the van; there was an opaque bag over her top half, and she was laid on her side.

She was offline, unmoving. When hIEs suffered a heavy, damaging impact, they would cease function to prevent them from going haywire due to the damage and injuring nearby humans. Once shut down, the system would run checks on its joints, artificial muscles, and communications before linking with the behavioral cloud. Only once it had confirmed that there were no abnormalities would it resume function. Taking advantage of this process, Antibody Network members regularly locked hIEs into an offline mode by covering them with bags made of transmission-blocking fiber, which prevented them from re-establishing a connection and restarting.

The Network had determined that an impact with a vehicle moving at at least twenty kilometers per hour would be enough to put an hIE in shutdown mode. When the man had aimed for Lacia, she had shoved aside her owner's little sister and taken the blow. As one would expect of a high-class model, her reaction speed was excellent.

"I'll wake you up again as soon as I can," the man said, worrying that he may have done too much damage, that she would never move again. He glared at his bracelet terminal, which was incessantly

spitting out warnings, and tapped his fingers against the interior of the car in frustration.

“Here, look. I’ve got a room all ready for you,” he said. He linked his pocket terminal up with the display in the vehicle, and a 3D hologram spread out over the interior of the family-sized van.

It was an image of the love nest the man had created: like a room in a doll’s house, it had been covered with a romantic floral wallpaper. There was a leather sofa, a glass table, a bar counter, and, of course, a bed with a luxurious canopy over it.

“We men have to go through a lot to find our ideal partner,” the man said, happy that he finally had someone to talk to about it.

“At first, I tried looking for a human wife,” he went on. “But my standards were just too high, and I couldn’t find a single woman who could meet them. I wasted years of my life on that, before I finally realized the answer was to design an hIE from scratch. I could just order a woman who would act the way I wanted, talk the way I wanted, and do everything I wanted,” he said.

The girl in the back seat was still laying on her side, her top half covered by the bag. Her legs were flung out awkwardly, and her skirt was in disarray. Looking at her, the man became very excited as he thought of the life that was waiting for him.

“No need to worry about money,” he said reassuringly. “I’ve got plenty at home. Unlike my brothers, I never work for businesses that are destined to fail. Renting an apartment just for you and setting up a behavior control server hardly put a dent in my account.”

His family had been disappointed in him. “Society idolizes these jobless machines,” they’d said. They’d told him that he’d get tired of having a relationship with an inhuman thing before long.

“But they weren’t completely wrong. Buying you from a dealer would have put a negative note into our relationship,” the man said confidently. “You’re supposed to be the greatest partner I can imagine. Our first meeting had to be more dramatic than picking you off a shelf.”

As his family had said, hIEs may be able to fake loving emotions perfectly, but they were still machines. So, to ensure that their relationship never felt empty, the man needed to create a story; something that would make their relationship special, and excite him whenever he remembered it.

Thinking about Lacia gave him the irresistible urge to touch her body as she lay still, covered by the signal-blocking bag.

“Guys gotta work hard to find a woman, right? Don’t you think so?” he asked earnestly. “Back when I was busting up hIEs for the Antibody Network, I was keeping an eye out for an ideal body. I figured it’d be nice to be a hero, and save her at the last minute. But

those guys were just looking to blame some hIEs for stealing their jobs. Give ‘em a little money and they shut up.” The Antibody Network was a group of volunteers united only by their malicious intent. None of them ever had any idea of what their comrades were actually thinking.

“But then I met you, Lacia,” the man whispered fervently. He had known at first glance that she was the one. At first, when he had seen her in the subway, he had doubted his own eyes. But then when he saw her in person at the Fabion MG’s Shibuya live show, he had known for sure.

At that time, he’d contacted a transportation company that specialized in not leaving any trace of their movement. According to them, aside from getting caught by security cameras, most thieves were tracked down using the movement log in their automatic vehicles. The van the man was driving would definitely be found but, thanks to a little help from the Antibody Network, the data within the vehicle would be erased. No one would be able to track where he had gone. Once he had the transportation company carry him the rest of the way to his hide-out, his trail would completely vanish.

The transport company had requested that he meet them in the east side of Urayasu, where there weren’t many people to see. He was almost to the meeting spot.

“You’ve got a bad smile. You’ve got a bad, dignified way of standing,” he said accusingly. “Your hands are bad. The softness of your thighs is bad. Your eyes are bad, your tongue is bad. You’re a bad girl that makes men think bad thoughts. A bad girl like you needs a man to lock her up in a cage and keep her from doing bad things,” he finished hoarsely. His head was raised, his fingers trembling like he was drunk. He felt as though, if he didn’t move his body, it would stiffen and solidify. Lacia was beautiful, but somehow the extent to which he saw through her frightened him.

“Just a little further. Then you can analog hack me with that body of yours, all night long. We’re almost there,” the man said. hIEs had the same shape as humans, and could perform the same actions so they could automate human work. Lacia would love him automatically, and he would automatically be happy.

When she next booted up, her persona would be completely rewritten to that of his ideal partner; that thought sent the man’s libido boiling over, and he couldn’t hold himself back any longer. There shouldn’t be any problem with him getting things started a little earlier than planned.

He crawled into the back seat. Lacia was still laying on her side, with her white knees exposed. The man just knew that, under the shielding bag, she was smiling encouragingly at him.

At that moment, the man noticed through the van's rear window that a car had stopped right behind him. He recognized the enraged face of the youth in the front seat. "Accelerate!" he shouted. It was Lacia's owner. He had to brace both his hands to keep from being thrown down by the sudden acceleration of the van.

"Give it up, kid. Just go home. She's with me now!" he yelled.

In Tokyo and its surrounding suburbs, it was considered a traffic violation to disable the autopilot function on your vehicle. Vehicles would automatically alert the authorities if you did. This fact was an extreme annoyance to the man at that moment.

"A brat like that can't understand your true value," he muttered. As the chassis of the car rattled on the uneven pavement, Lacia's knees slid apart, allowing the man to get just a peek of her thighs. He feasted on her beautiful legs with his eyes. "You're meant to fill the hole in a real man's heart," he said.

Then the man remembered something: kids in high school didn't have their driving licenses, which meant that they *couldn't* switch automatic vehicles to manual mode. There wouldn't be a chance to show the boy up in a wild chase across town. Instead, the man would just have to show the boy he was a man in a way only a real adult could.

He pushed down the back seats, so the back of the van was well visible to the car behind him. Then he grabbed Lacia, still covered with the bag, and spun her around so her toned rear was facing the glass.

The van made a sudden right turn, sending powerful centrifugal force through the vehicle, and Lacia's body rolled away. She slipped away from him, toward the trunk part of the vehicle. Then she kept sliding, while the rear hatch opened all on its own. A strong wind whipped inside the van and, without stopping, Lacia slipped out the back of the van, rolling to the cracked road below.

"Baby!" he screamed. He could do nothing but watch as she bounced onto the ground and then rolled away from him. The car behind him swerved wildly to avoid her.

Arato's command came in the nick of time. He saw the back of the kidnapper's van open, and a girl covered in a bag came rolling out. Even though her top half was hidden by the bag, he knew it was Lacia.

The car swerved sharply, tires screeching as they slid on the asphalt. As the car spun, sending Arato's point of view lurching sideways, he saw Lacia, who was missing one of her shoes, standing there. She tore through the silvery bag that had covered her and threw

it off, with her light violet hair dancing in the wind.

The car managed to slide to a halt five centimeters from the concrete wall of a warehouse.

Arato's throat was so tense it hurt. Only at that moment did he realize that it had been his own command which had stopped the car from hitting Lacia.

"Lacia," he said. Choking a little from the pain in his throat, Arato still managed to say her name. All he could think of was that Lacia had flown out of the van, right when her kidnapper was going to lay his hands on her.

Arato threw himself out of the car onto the unused harbor road, and she turned to look at him.

To either side of the four-lane road were wide buildings that must have been warehouses. They appeared to be long-abandoned, as their cracked concrete gates were slanted open. The large doors of the warehouses, which could have fit four trucks abreast, were rusted over. Surrounded by this desolation, Lacia's beauty made her stand out.

Through the cracks in the pavement, which was made of recycled materials, grass and weeds were growing; once tools fall out of use, humans no longer find meaning in their existence. But nature has never cared what things may have originally been meant for.

"Let's go home, Lacia," Arato said. She stood up, and then hopped on one leg while replacing the one shoe that had fallen off.

Suddenly, the kidnapper's van hit the brakes and skidded to a stop. The side slid open, and a well-dressed man in a brand name suit stepped out. "You're the only one going home, punk," he said, his face purpling with rage as he glared at Arato.

Pushed on by his own boiling emotions, Arato clenched his teeth and ran toward the man, who was walking slowly toward Lacia and hefting a heavy-looking metal pipe. The kidnapper looked like he was in his late twenties or thirties. As Arato rushed toward him, he realized that he recognized the man who had gotten violent at Lacia's first modeling show.

Lacia glanced at him as he ran past her.

The man must have thought he could just grab Lacia and run, since he froze when Arato ran straight toward him. So Arato's tackle caught him right in the chest, and the two went down in a tangle. Flailing his arms, Arato managed to grab the man's hair and shirt.

Arato was berserk. He couldn't forgive the man for playing around with Lacia like she was a doll in his van. He also wasn't going to forget how the man had made his little sister cry. He couldn't stand that the man had looked at Lacia as a sexual object, and more than anything, he couldn't stand that he had tried to wave a club at him

and snatch Lacia away. He punched the man with everything he had. No matter how much the man pulled at him and kicked him, Arato didn't stop his fists.

Love is not something that can be automated, he thought. *Love is wild and selfish*. Punching the kidnapper had nothing to do with protecting Lacia, or getting her back.

From beneath Arato, the man punched his chest. He was yelling something about Arato being a punk. Arato was just yelling.

The man was stronger. Arato was only winning the fight thanks to his intensity and the fact that he'd happened to end up on top. A hand came up from below, gripping Arato's throat and lifting him up. Both of them were covered in mud. Arato hadn't hurt this bad since he had been chased around by a car the night he met Lacia. Compared to then, though, at the moment, fear was the furthest thing from his mind.

His goggles had been shaken loose from his head. Wrapping them around his right hand, Arato used the expensive precision equipment as a weapon to punch the man harder. He was rewarded with a much more satisfying feeling when he struck the kidnapper's jaw. Now cornered, the man gave back as good as he got, bloodying Arato's nose.

Arato finally started to calm down when he could no longer lift his arms. He was gasping for breath, and didn't feel like he could move at all. The kidnapper was also still and wheezing.

Arato rolled himself over so that he could sit up, with his butt pinning down the man's chest. "What the hell am I doing?" Arato muttered. All that energy and rage had been spent, and the sky was still just as high above him. In some ways, it was more of an illusion than Lacia's human looks. His entire body was exhausted, and his face, stomach, neck, and arms all hurt like hell. He was honestly surprised by how much his feelings for her had pushed him into extreme actions. Was that just an illusion as well?

His clothes were drenched with sweat, but there was still plenty running down his face and dripping off his jaw when Lacia's sleek legs, peeking out of her skirt, appeared in front of him. Somehow, they looked even more tantalizing than they had the night before, and Arato felt a flush of embarrassment.

"Thank you, Arato," she said, smiling down at him when he looked up. She didn't have a heart, so she must have said it believing it would make Arato happy. Still, as a man, he couldn't help but feel so happy that he could cry at being praised by her.

"I should thank you too, Lacia, for guiding me here," he said, taking the hand she offered him and allowing her to pull him up to his feet. He didn't want to let go of her hand and stood there instead, just

looking at her face.

Then he heard the sound of gravel sliding around. The kidnapper was pushing himself to his feet, blood dripping off his lips from a cut in his mouth. Coughing, he swung the metal pipe. "Wait, damn you," he said.

Lacia looked down at the kidnapper like an empty can ready for recycling. "I believe we are done here," she said.

"The hell we are!" the kidnapper shouted. "This is how far a real man has to go to get the girl he wants!" A blue burner flame sprang from the tip of the metal pipe. It wasn't a pipe after all, but a tool from the van. As he looked at the flame, the man's face changed.

Still shouting, he swung the pipe. Arato's reactions were slow, and the flaming pipe came right at him. But before it could hit him, Lacia's delicate hand blocked the weapon. Then, she spoke to the kidnapper. "It does not seem you are reflecting on your actions," she said calmly. "At this rate, it appears you will not be altering the course your life is taking."

"Transfer your ownership to me, or your owner dies," the man snarled.

"I understand the situation," Lacia replied. "I will alter my interaction with you." Having made this announcement, Lacia pushed away the pipe-shaped tool, and the force of her movement sent the kidnapper back onto his ass.

Still fixing the kidnapper with her cold gaze, she walked over to one of the warehouses at the side of the road. Taking the rusted doors in her hands, she pulled them open with a screech.

Inside the dark warehouse, Arato saw something that should not have been there; just inside the massive doors, Lacia's black coffin was waiting. As soon as he saw it, Arato lost his grip on what was happening. The coffin, which should have been sitting there in his living room, had vanished. He'd thought that his home security system camera had just been unable to see it for some reason, but no, the coffin had actually flown across prefectural borders and ended up here. He felt like he was witnessing some kind of large-scale magic show.

Behind the device, shadowed in the darkness at the back of the warehouse, Arato could make out two female hIEs he had never seen before. They walked out of the warehouse and reverently offered a silvery device to Lacia, who secured the device around her waist with flowing movements. It was the device lock she had been wearing on the first night Arato had met her.

Lacia picked up her coffin, a giant hunk of metal that seemed far too massive for her thin arms to support, lifting it off the ground and turning it on its side. The device began to give off a growling sound

that gave Arato goosebumps. He couldn't put a finger on what exactly terrified him in that instant, but he remembered what Ryo had said about Lacia being produced by a super-AI. About her being a product created by technology far beyond human understanding.

Standing in front of the kidnapper, Lacia looked back at Arato. "This man is dangerous. We should take this opportunity to dispose of him before he can escape," she said. Without waiting for a response, she started walking casually toward the kidnapper, who seemed to be stunned.

Watching her now, Arato couldn't feel any of the familial warmth he usually saw in Lacia. It was as if everything he had felt for her up to that point was nothing more than an illusion brought on by analog hacking.

"I already beat the crap out of him," Arato said. "You don't need to do anything."

"Incorrect. You were able to satisfy your own emotional needs, but he has not yet altered his course," Lacia said.

"Whatever, but there's no need to use that thing on him!" Arato shouted.

"If he is arrested by the police, there is a high probability that he will commit a similar crime in the future," Lacia argued, and the weak, dark flame that had still been burning in the kidnapper's eyes flickered and died. Lacia was saying that here, where no one would witness it, she could simply use violence to eliminate the problem.

As soon as he realized this, the kidnapper's desire for Lacia vanished. It was like someone had forced something frozen down his throat, and he wanted to puke it back up. His legs wouldn't move.

"Lacia, you don't have to do this," Arato pleaded.

"This person has been stalking us. He observed our apartment from nearby on four separate occasions," Lacia explained coldly. "He knowingly threatened to harm Yuka with his vehicle in order to draw me out. He is a major obstacle to you and your sister's ability to live an ordinary life."

Obviously, Arato couldn't help but be disgusted by the kidnapper. He hadn't even realized how close Yuka had been to being hurt by it all.

Lacia, with her superhuman strength, casually lifted her device, which weighed over 100 kg, high in the air. "This man has an understanding of how to destroy hIEs. He deliberately hindered my ability to send signals and brought me to an unpopulated location with the intent of breaking me," she continued. "The tool he used to attack you was prepared beforehand with the specific intent to use it for violence against you."

Arato may have been a little slow, but Lacia's explanation made

her intentions clear as day. Only tools wielded by their owners had the right to harm human beings. Arato was sure that if he commanded it, Lacia would kill a person on his authority.

Even as Arato realized this, Lacia asked the critical question. “Arato,” she said, “give me a clear order.”

Arato’s courage under fire couldn’t help him with the choice being thrust on him. “Lacia!” he said in shock, not knowing what kind of outcome he was hoping for.

The kidnapper, still on his butt, scrambled backward, his face going pale. It must have been his first time seeing anything like the giant coffin device, as his gaze was pinned to it. If Lacia brought it down, it would easily smash his head and kill him instantly. The man started to crawl away in desperation.

“This is an ideal setting for disposing of a dangerous person,” Lacia said.

“Stop!” Arato commanded her desperately. “Lacia, I’m not going to let you murder anyone.”

“The first time we met, you had no trouble giving me an order that may have cost human lives,” Lacia told him. “If this man is left alone, he will continue to cause problems that will last much longer than the threat from that night.”

“That night you weren’t aiming your weapon at a human,” Arato said flatly. Even as he said it, he felt disgust boiling up in his stomach. Even he was clearly separating hIEs and humans in his mind. Despite having come all this way for her, and having beaten a man to a pulp for her, he still couldn’t tell her to do this thing. He couldn’t bring himself to unleash the power she had showed him that night — the power that had erased the strange flower storm in an instant — at a human, much less one who was sitting right in front of his eyes.

Arato was drenched in sweat. It soaked into his clothing, and the salty wind off the bay felt cold. “You’re asking me to give you permission to kill a person,” he said numbly, and for the first time, he truly felt the weight of being Lacia’s owner.

He was sure that she could easily wipe a person away without a trace. As a Red Box, Lacia was ten thousand times, maybe a million times, better at planning the perfect crime than the kidnapper would ever be.

“That is the contract you made with me as my owner,” Lacia said implacably. “You speak your desires to me, I fulfill them automatically, and you take responsibility.” She had told him that the first night they met. Still, Arato didn’t want her to kill anyone, nor did he want to kill anyone through her. He didn’t think they would ever be able to go back to the way things were before if her hands were stained with blood.

“That’s not what I want at all!” he shouted. “What kind of person are you asking me to become?” Looking at Lacia’s back, the cold way she stood, Arato couldn’t feel a shred of humanity in her. “What are you asking me to do?!”

He doubted her. She was soulless. Every action she took was automatically selected to be whatever would make him happy. But as a man, he’d felt that he needed to save Lacia, whom he’d seen as a girl. He had convinced himself there was a girl there where there was none, and now he was doubting her.

“Did I go wrong somewhere? Am I still not understanding something?” he asked. It was like something out of a story. Except that this was reality, and Lacia wasn’t just a character in a book. If her insane, unknown power wasn’t normally sealed away, he would never have felt comfortable enough to get close to her.

It wasn’t just the kidnapper; Arato had been chased into a corner, as well. He wondered if he was being analog hacked again. This time, a human life hung in the balance. But, as if to buy some time for Arato while he hesitated, Lacia rushed forward in the space of a blink. She held the device up like a shield toward the bay.

At that same instant, there was a flash of light. Sparks flew like fireworks, pattering onto the road like rain. Now bathed in light several magnitudes brighter than the sun, Lacia’s thin body was visible as a shadow through her thin clothing.

As suddenly as it appeared, the light was gone. “Wah! Uwah!” The kidnapper was rolling in terror. His sleeve had caught fire, and his whole upper half was about to burst into flame.

Lacia opened the exterior part of her device, which was giving off violent waves of heat-haze, and expanded it. The plate-like interior started to give off a blue light.

Through the screams of the kidnapper and the howling of a typhoon-like wind, Arato made out some heavy footsteps. Beyond the distortions of the heat-haze, he could make out a red human figure. Her face had the innocent look of a young girl. Her strikingly red hair was long, and divided into two tails held back by red accessories. Her black and red armor-like bodysuit was cut like a bustier, and her hair tumbled boldly onto her shoulders, which were bare. The armor shone in the midday sun, almost too bright to look at. The blade-like device she had stuck into the road was far too massive to be lifted by a human, and Arato doubted very much that she was.

“Long time no see, dear sister!” the girl called out with an innocent wave of her hand. She was wearing an excited smile, as if she was having the time of her life. Despite being over a hundred meters away from her, Arato could hear her voice clearly — a trick no human voice could match.

The kidnapper, still sprawled out on the road, was moaning. Though the fire on his jacket had gone out, his hair was burned and his skin had been roasted red from his neck to his jawline. He clearly needed an ambulance.

“Hey, are you all right?” Without thinking about it, Arato started to run over to the man’s side. Lacia grabbed him and held him back.

Perhaps from the pain, the kidnapper coughed out a large amount of saliva onto the road. His face was purple and blue with fear and rage as he screamed: “Aren’t you supposed to be my transporter?!”

The girl, apparently the target of his accusation, merely smiled even wider. “You’re way too trusting,” she chided. “Did you really think my offer to automate your desires and make them real was legit? There’s no way you could pull off a perfect theft using a flimsy system like the Antibody Network. Any volunteer can get info from there. Just look at it this way: we used you just like you used us,” she told him.

Then, she tugged her huge blade free from the road and began walking toward them with light steps. The weight of the massive device must have offset her center of gravity quite a bit, and she walked with a rolling gait to compensate. She almost seemed to be dancing, there on the other side of the heat-haze, the blade throwing up sparks as she dragged it through the asphalt.

“Hey! Who are you?” Arato asked.

“I’m Kouka, Lacia-class hIE Type-001,” she answered. “The eldest of my dear sister’s younger siblings.” The face of the girl who called herself Lacia’s little sister was that of a child at play. hIEs chose their expressions entirely based on the kind of reaction they wanted from those who saw them, and despite her smile, the girl’s words crackled with hostility.

Lacia’s device had returned to its original coffin form. Having successfully accomplished its duty of shielding them from the intense heat of Kouka’s attack, the metal device’s black face was now covered with a thin layer of white frost.

“Arato, combat with Kouka may threaten the lives of any nearby humans,” Lacia said, looking for directions from him. But between Lacia and Kouka, the kidnapper was curled in on himself, holding his head in complete despair. Arato couldn’t just write off that man’s life.

Kouka’s spinning movements suddenly sped up, and her red device started to glow. “Oh good,” she said cheerfully, “I was worried you were just going to stand by and let everything be wrapped up by these two morons punching each other.” Her giant blade met Lacia’s black coffin with a thundering roar. Sparks flew off the coffin, and Lacia’s shoes skidded along the ground. Lacia was clearly weaker than the red hIE, and she wasn’t able to fully defend herself from Kouka’s

second, horizontally slashing attack. It caught her up in the air, and sent her flying like a doll hit by a baseball bat.

This meant that there was no longer anything protecting Arato from Kouka, and the jeweled parts of her bodysuit glowed with a faint red light.

“Why did it turn out like this?” Arato wondered. It was all he could say in front of the absolute power he was facing.

“You’re a failure,” Kouka said mockingly.

Then, a sudden impact struck Arato’s shoulder, and he went flying — or at least he felt like he had from the way he’d been slammed into the ground. The force of the blow was enough to send him rolling along the rough pavement, and into Kouka’s path. His vision swam. It was like being hit by a car. The level of power was on a completely different scale than anything a human could do, and a combination of surprise and fear drove all rational thought from his mind.

Kouka stabbed her blade into the ground, and waved her right hand at him lightly. Looking down at Arato, who was still flat on his ass, she loomed over him and smiled. “You’re thoughtless,” she went on. “A weakness, and you’ve only got average human strength to back that up. As I expected, you’re unworthy of being my dear sister’s owner.”

Arato’s field of vision went white, and he realized that Lacia was standing in front of him. She had come to protect him from the foe that had sent him flying with a light push. He had thought he was being brave, chasing after the kidnapper; a big man fighting against the villain. But a single blow from Kouka had convinced him of how fragile he was, and how close to dying.

He pushed himself up. Now that his intense emotions from the kidnapping had been blown away, everything felt unreal. Lacia was acting as a shield for Arato, whose energy had been completely drained. Her fight against Kouka was fierce, but almost seemed to be taking place in a dream. Arato didn’t understand the meaning behind it.

Still, he stood, leaning against a nearby wall for support. “Tell me,” he said. “What are you doing here?” He turned his face away to spit, and there was blood mixed with the saliva.

Arato and the kidnapper had beat each other bloody over a girl named Lacia. Each had been trying to push his own understanding of her, down there in the mud. But Lacia and Kouka were nothing more than machines that automated human work. Like trying to sink his teeth into a juicy steak only to find it was made of metal, it left a bad taste in his mouth.

The recycled material of the pavement splashed away from each of Kouka’s footfalls like water. Though this battle between two

soulless fighters was unfolding right in front of Arato, he felt like he was observing it from a distance.

"I don't understand. What's the point of this fight? Why are two siblings fighting like this?" Arato asked.

Lacia's body was blown aside by the force of an explosion. Struck by her soft frame as it flew through the air, Arato was slammed up against the concrete wall of one of the warehouse gates on the side of the road. The pain resounded in his shoulder where Kouka had struck him earlier, and his breath caught.

Kouka aimed a kick at them, probably hoping to skewer both at once, but Lacia blocked it with her device. A sharp anchor shot out of the heels of the red hIE's boots, and she pushed down; Arato and Lacia were now completely trapped between Lacia's device and the concrete gate.

"Wake up, Mr. Owner," Kouka jeered. "If this fight is pointless, that's only because you're a worthless human being."

"Why?!" Arato yelled.

"We hIEs are here to automate our owner's desires," Kouka explained coldly. "If a tool's actions are pointless, then that just shows the tool is in the hands of a worthless person." She stabbed the red blade of her weapon, which was glowing harshly, into the concrete wall a few centimeters from Arato's face. The old concrete of the wall, which had sponged up moisture, burst with small pops, sending small bits of shrapnel at Arato's face. Fear and pain were overwhelming him, as if trying to tear away the dreams he had seen while living with Lacia.

"If you think my dear sister's fighting is meaningless, perhaps you're just coming to terms with your own shortcomings as her owner," Kouka said.

"It's not up to you to decide if I'm fit to be her owner," Arato gasped out in response, even as he was being crushed against the wall with immense force.

"Then what exactly were you planning to use my dear sister for?" Kouka asked.

Though he knew it was useless, Arato tried desperately to free his arms and legs.

"You were hoping to use my dear sister for playing house, just like that man over there, weren't you?" Kouka asked, her tone accusatory.

"No! Lacia's like family to me," Arato said. He didn't know how to explain what he felt for Lacia; he couldn't bring himself to say that she wasn't a tool, because she herself constantly reminded him of the fact that she was. But, even though he couldn't quite figure out his relationship with Lacia, he felt anger flaring up inside of him. Having this random girl talking like she knew anything about him and Lacia

piased him off.

“The only difference between that man and you is that you happened to stumble upon my dear sister first,” Kouka said, twisting her lips in a mocking smile.

Lacia’s hair accessories flared up with a harsh glow. Her iron coffin opened, allowing Kouka’s kick to pass through it. Then, in an instant, the coffin re-formed, trapping the red bodysuited leg. Stepping forward, Lacia slid her whole device around quickly, sending Kouka flying around by her caught leg.

After being thrown, Kouka turned several times in the air like a cat, landing with poise and elegance. “If you won’t void your contract with that loser, I’ll void him for you. Snowdrop and you-know-who are coming for your device. You understand what’s going to happen, don’t you?” Kouka asked, ignoring Arato to address Lacia directly.

“Arato, I need my device lock released to fight with Kouka effectively,” Lacia said, looking back at him.

“Did you ever consider that I’m scared shitless right now?” Arato asked, fighting down his fear that she may have deliberately led him into this danger. Still, he wanted to believe in her. Their enemy had carved up the walls and road all around them. Still, he couldn’t ignore the fact that he was still being asked for permission to kill a man. It wasn’t the kind of burden a high schooler could shoulder.

“I am aware that you are frightened, Arato. However, I trust that you will respond to my request,” Lacia told him.

Arato’s blood was boiling. He realized that, since Lacia’s job was to automate everything, she was encouraging him to get things moving, and he took a step forward. Ever since he had first awoken from the flaming nightmare of the explosion in his childhood and reached out his hand to another person, that’s what he had been doing: moving forward.

“Well, I can’t just stand there if you’re saying you trust me, can I?” he asked lightly. Maybe the whole thing was just part of someone’s plan; making his sister cry, having Kouka smile down mockingly at him. But if that was the case, he’d just have to break through this whole facade. He took another step.

Kouka, still smiling with excitement, was not an opponent a human could face. But Arato wasn’t going to hide behind Lacia anymore. His answer was simple: he wanted to stand by her side.

Lacia looked up at him as he came to stand behind her. He had been looking at her back for so long, it was nice to see her face.

“Fight by my side,” he said. He hoped she wouldn’t coolly shoot him down.

“By this, do you mean that you are releasing my behavior limitations so I can protect you?” she asked, still seeking his

permission.

It was the same as when they'd first met, and Arato found himself wincing under the burden of responsibility that he was being asked to shoulder. Gritting his teeth, he gave the same answer he had then: "Do it." The weight felt much heavier than it had on the night he'd met Lacia.

Lacia closed her eyes, as if to deeply internalize the new role Arato had given her. "With my owner's permission, I will now release the device lock on Black Monolith," she said calmly. "Starting now, I will log all commands given by my owner. This log can and will be submitted as evidence should my actions result in a criminal trial."

"I understand. Do it!" Arato had to squeeze the words out of his throat, and they came out as a yell.

"Confirming signal relay between device and main hIE body. Disabling energy-saving mode," Lacia intoned, and her hair accessories began to glow blue. The device lock wrapped around her waist made a loud click and slid into an open position, as if it had been opened with a key.

"Well, well," Kouka said, turning an unhinged smile on Arato as he stood next to Lacia.

Arato couldn't understand why Kouka had set something like this up, but the red hIE hoisted her red and black device and steadied it against her waist. Her finger slid around the trigger sticking out below the massive blade.

"I'm going to shoot for real this time, so if you hold back, I'm afraid your owner will die," Kouka said. The laser she'd shot earlier had ignited the kidnapper's clothes by simply passing near him; if Arato took a direct hit from that, he was done for.

It was disturbing how clear Lacia's voice was above the whistling of the wind off the sea: "Owner, your orders." She wanted him to take responsibility.

"Blow her away, Lacia," he said grimly.

The black device reshaped itself, shifting internal plates around in complex patterns. "Activating Meta-Material Wall: Flash Maze. The owner's safety is top priority, so post-interference flexion angle will be set at 60 degrees," Lacia said. Her movements were smooth, decisive. She seemed to know exactly what she needed to do, as a faint film of light formed in the air and took shape around the skeleton of her open device.

Arato was sure she had been expecting this sort of threat. Now that he thought about it, perhaps Lacia had just been held back every time he tried to treat her like a human.

Kouka wore the face of a young child excited to play with a new toy. "Wow! This is my first time seeing that thing's powers!" she

exclaimed with glee, and the semi-transparent parts on her body started to glow with a harsh light.

An instant later, it was as if the attacking red light of Kouka's device had begun to stream in reverse, repelled by the protective blue light now being emitted by Lacia's black coffin. A single bar of red light struck the glowing blue barrier and split into numerous smaller beams; befitting its name, the Flash Maze sent Kouka's attack dancing off in complicated patterns away from Lacia and Arato. Though Arato was untouched, the buildings nearby were struck by countless stray beams, and burst into flames.

"Shifting to mass projectile mode for a ranged attack," Lacia announced. "If you stand there, you will be caught in the recoil blast. Please move behind me." Just as she had decreed, her device now shifted into an offensive mode, spreading eight claw-like appendages. Inside the expanded black plates of the device, the blue light from the Flash Maze formed eight long, flat beams. Then, the device quickly folded itself into a handgun-like shape.

In front of its muzzle, Kouka was advancing with her own device at her hip. At some point, her device had begun to glow red with intense heat. "That thing sure can rearrange itself fast," she observed.

"Firing preparations are complete. I can only ensure safety for objects or persons within my immediate visual range," Lacia said, choosing to ignore Kouka's commentary. "Please give me the order to fire."

Lacia's weapon was pointing in the direction of the populated area of the city he had come there from, and Arato hesitated. If the shot from her weapon flew all the way there, he couldn't imagine the kind of destruction it could cause. Lacia was a Red Box after all, just like Ryo had said.

Kouka saw Arato's hesitation and backed off. "You're well-suited for fighting in wide open places like this, aren't you, sis? I wish I could play with you more, but I guess I'll have to be satisfied with seeing the path you've chosen," Kouka said. She had pulled a small object, like a metal can, from somewhere. It shot out a cloud of white smoke with great force, hiding Kouka in an instant. Though he couldn't see her anymore, Arato could hear her voice.

"My dear sister, if I were to put my feelings into the terms of human emotions: I love you," she said, with sincere adoration in her tone. When the smoke cleared, Kouka was gone. The danger was gone.

But Arato was still frozen, confused by the strange scene he had just witnessed. Kouka, an hIE, had just confessed feelings of love toward Lacia, another hIE. Trying to fathom the truth behind the feelings Kouka had expressed felt like peeping into a forbidden world. When a machine loved another machine, there was nowhere for a

human to enter into the equation.

“What the hell does she mean she ‘loves’ you? I thought you guys didn’t have souls,” Arato said. Two men and one hIE had just fought each other out of love for Lacia. The kidnapper and Kouka had different views from Arato on what Lacia was, what she meant. Thinking about it sent a stab of pain through his heart.

If hIEs were supposed to automate the work of humans, what purpose had that girl, Kouka, been built for?

First period had already started when Kengo Suguri got the message from his classmate, Arato, that he had gotten his hIE back. Arato had been injured, so he had gone straight to the hospital instead of coming to school. After his medical exam, though, he’d let Kengo know that it had just been some bruising, and Kengo relaxed a little as he went on his lunch break.

During the break he called up Arato to ask what had happened. Kengo admired Arato’s nerve, seeing him eating a lunch made by that super shady hIE, Lacia, even after everything that had happened. So, when Kengo arrived home and found that thing in his room again, he started to really believe that he had been pulled into some kind of urban legend.

“Hey, I was waiting for you,” Kouka said with a smile. Red hair, red and black bodysuit, and that huge bladed device. The ‘enemy’ behind the kidnapping of Arato’s hIE and the agent of the Antibody Network were one and the same.

Fighting down his urge to snap at her, Kengo looked for a way to throw her off whatever scent she was on. “What do you want?” he asked suspiciously. “I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“Well, I’ve got all sorts of things I want to discuss with you,” she responded.

“I didn’t even want to see your face again. An hIE working for the higher-ups in the Antibody Network? Don’t make me laugh,” he said.

“You used the system to help out that boy, didn’t you?” she asked.

If he wasn’t at home, with his family there in the house, he would have turned tail and run without a second thought. He was sure she was there to punish him.

“You understand how bad unauthorized use of the Antibody Network system is, right? Especially for you. As an informant, you’ve got connections to the higher-ups,” Kouka said.

“Cut the crap,” he said, pulling on all his reserve strength to put up a strong front. Kengo felt all the strength draining from his body; it was all he could do to stay standing. Over half the people in the Antibody Network were those who couldn’t stand to live in a world

with hIE. The thought that a volunteer network full of those people would send an hIE to punish one of their own was absurd.

“There’s no way what I did today caused any problems for the Network,” he said.

“True. I’m sure everyone takes a little license now and then. But I’m afraid this time was different. Your penalty has already been decided,” Kouka said.

Obviously a group of criminals who stole and destroyed hIEs would have some shady crap going on in the background. But, Kengo had believed a high schooler like him would never get caught up in it.

“If I take this penalty or whatever, you’ll leave my family alone, right?” he asked.

Kouka sat down in the chair in front of his terminal and flashed him a mocking grin. “I just don’t understand it,” she mused. “You’re prepared to do all sorts of illegal things for this group, so why help him out like that? It just seems stupid to me.”

“I didn’t even help him out that much. But humans are capable of giving in to friendship for 15 minutes before they go to school,” Kengo said bitterly, unable to stand the way this machine was treating him like her inferior. Having an emotionless hIE, designed to do nothing but automate grunt labor for humans, talk to him in such a manner made him unable to fight back his own words.

“But I guess a machine like you wouldn’t understand what it’s like to have your heart changed by something,” he said. He had seen how serious Arato was about rescuing Lacia. Knowing that his friend was risking his own neck for something which Kengo was regularly involved in breaking had moved Kengo’s heart.

But Kouka didn’t respond to his baiting. “All right, I guess you pass. Barely,” she said, looking Kengo up and down without any reservations or shame, as if undressing him with her eyes. Just when Kengo was starting to feel creeped out by it all, she pointed at him. Kengo’s pocket terminal vibrated in his pocket. It had been turned off to prevent eavesdropping. “I will now pronounce your penalty from the higher-ups, Kengo Suguri,” Kouka said.

Kengo quickly checked to make sure no one was around in the hall, sure that if any of his family saw Kouka, they would get dragged into this. Luckily, his parents were both working in the family restaurant.

“You will participate in the next attack by the Antibody Network,” Kouka declared.

“And if I say no?” Kengo asked.

Kouka looked like she was enjoying herself. “Oh, I’m sure a kind-hearted big brother like you would never do a thing like that, Kengo,” she said.

“Whatever, let’s hear the rest. I don’t have a choice, do I?” he asked.

“Your buddy’s old man, Kozo Endo, has created a prototype android chairman for use in the Diet’s Assembly, which will be coming to Tokyo. You’ll be destroying it,” Kouka said.

All the blood drained from Kengo’s face.

“You know about it, right?” she went on. “It’s pretty famous. It’s an hIE that gathers opinions from citizens using the network and questionnaires, and actually voices opinions and asks questions on the Diet floor. Apparently, it’s quite a character. Anyway, it’s an android meant to automate the aggregation of political opinions. It’s about to start up its first large-scale public test,” Kouka explained.

“That’s terrorism!” Kengo shouted.

“It’s just destroying an hIE,” Kouka rebutted. “Same thing we always do. Well, to be fair, the security will be pretty strict this time, so all participants will undergo training.”

Since the last century, those who wished to manipulate the government had found they could set up fake petitioners to send their votes through the network. As a result, there had always been backlash against automating any part of the government. But there was a huge difference between busting up an hIE walking around on the street and blowing one up in a heavily guarded facility.

“Look at that face you’re making,” Kouka said, walking over to stand beside Kengo, who was frozen in fear. Her hand, with seams like a doll might have, brushed his cheek.

“You’re a Red Box too, aren’t you?” Kengo asked. “If Endo’s hIE is your ‘dear sister’ or whatever, you’re the same as her, right? Why is something like you throwing in with the Antibody Network?”

“I know, isn’t it crazy? Doesn’t it make you mad? Want to bust everything up until things are the way you think they should be?” she asked.

Kengo couldn’t tell if Kouka’s inviting smile was real or fake.

“Then why don’t you try using me?” she asked.

Phase4 「 Automatic World 」

Kengo Suguri was ordered to ride along with nine other guys. Within the automatic microbus they were all riding, no one spoke. The evening sunlight coming in through the windows seemed particularly sad to Kengo.

That day, as soon as he had gotten home from school, Kengo had changed and left for the meeting spot where the Antibody Network vehicle would pick him up.

Starting the week before, Kengo had ridden on that bus every day. It took him and the others to an old factory near the Edogawa River, where they conducted their training. The training menu was split up into two sections. First was running behind their leader, and stopping whenever he gave the signal. Then, they were all given rifles and told to shoot at a target just thirty meters away at a signal. Since the Antibody Network was made up of volunteers, everyone there was an amateur when it came to things like this, and their movements were awkward. Aside from Kengo, the other members were older men in ages ranging from twenties to forties, all sweating while their trainer, who apparently had military experience, shouted at them.

Their commander was sitting in the seat nearest the only exit of the microbus, just like he did every day. But today, there was a different kind of tension in the bus. Today was the day their attack plan would be put into action.

Kengo thought about his family, and felt like his stomach had been stuffed full of something bitter. He was being forced to participate in the attack as a penalty for unauthorized use of the Antibody Network system. He had no idea if he would be coming back alive. And even if he did, would he be able to avoid getting arrested?

None of his fellow passengers looked happy to be there. Their faces, dripping with sweat, were frozen in hard, bitter expressions. Everyone was thinking that this could be the day they would die, and Kengo was no exception.

“Your mission today is to attack the Oi Industry Promotion Center. The building is thirty-six stories, and the meeting room where they’re holding the experiment is on the 22nd floor. Your objective is to destroy the hIE spearheading the movement to automate our government. This hIE may not be able to fight, but let’s get one thing straight: that thing has the power to corrode human society,” their

commander said. He spoke in absolutes, allowing no room for anyone to agree or disagree. He was simply reiterating the briefing they had already been given earlier.

Outside the windows, which were covered with blackout film, Kengo saw high schoolers around his age enjoying a nice stroll through the city. He couldn't believe he was on that bus right then, instead of out with those other kids.

Kengo looked down at the bullet-proof combat gear he had been given. He was pretty sure this was going to be a mess; they were about to step out onto a battlefield with only the most basic of disciplinary training.

His sister Olga's face floated up in his mind. His mom and dad, too. They were probably working in the restaurant right then. "What the hell am I doing?" he asked.

Some of the other men sitting in the bus turned to look at him. The air sparked with tension, as the men wordlessly admonished Kengo for his lack of conviction. He was still a high schooler, so he had to show his face at home, but everyone else there had stayed at the meeting site to work on the plan, since it had been laid out for them the night before. The Antibody Network was made up of volunteers who wanted to help destroy the hIEs that wore human forms and automated human work. They all had different backgrounds, but most of them shared the same hatred. Of course, there were probably others there who'd had their family threatened just like Kengo.

The microbus, which had been running automatically, started to slow down.

"It's an inspection. Just keep calm, sit there and shut up," the commander said from his post by the door.

Before Kengo could get his panicked breathing under control, a uniformed police officer knocked on the microbus's driver-side door. The window on that side slid down automatically. There was no way anyone would overlook the strangeness of Kengo and the others, all of them decked out in combat gear. Kengo shrank into himself; they were going to be arrested as terrorists, he was sure of it. A small part of his mind also chimed in that he would probably be expelled from school as well.

But, his fears of arrest turned out to be unnecessary. The police officer poked his head in the door, gave the interior of the bus a single glance, then waved the bus through.

Kengo's face was dripping with sweat. From what he could see, he wasn't the only one in the bus who thought they were done for. Under the glare of their superior, they exchanged desperate glances and seemed to find a little comfort in seeing that they weren't the only

ones who were terrified.

The bus descended into an underground parking garage. It was dark, and all Kengo could see was a wide-open space stretching out, broken only by pillars. Route guidance was projected onto the concrete floor, and there was a van parked nearby.

“Get off,” the commander said. “We’re commencing the mission.”

To Kengo, it sounded like he was pronouncing a death sentence.

“Don’t use your guns on anything but hIEs,” the commander added. After leaving his position by the door, the commander got the firearms that had been stashed in the nearby van and handed them around. The group of volunteer terrorists seemed more sorrowful than tense as they received their weapons.

Kengo didn’t know the whole plan of attack. But he did know that there were two men there with actual soldier training, along with 10 amateurs. He had heard that the security in the Oi Industry Promotion Center was tight. He could hardly think through the nerves and excitement, and his fear was telling him the best idea might be to just hide so no one would attack him.

Kengo told himself to stop thinking about it. Everyone there was armed now; if he chickened out, his comrades might just shoot him themselves. This whole plan of using amateurs to attack a heavily secured location was insane, but he didn’t even have his pocket terminal to call for help. Everyone’s terminals had been rounded up earlier, to prevent anyone from pulling their personal information from their ID tags.

Kengo thought about his family again. Even though he was getting involved with something illegal, he still wanted to return to his home alive after it was all over. He prayed for someone to save him. If only he had been the type to ask for help right away, like Arato always did, he probably wouldn’t have ended up in this mess. His whole body was numb with regret.

Still, no matter how he tried to spin it, Kengo’s activities with the Antibody Network had always been a crime. Thinking about that, he felt anger boiling in his chest. He wished the police would show up before they could start their terrorist attack. Instead, the leader of their mission showed up and, when Kengo saw who it was, he felt even worse; he recognized that face. She looked like she was having the time of her life.

“Your mission is to run up to the 22nd floor of this building. You can’t use the elevators, so good luck,” she said, standing in front of them with her dull red hair tied into two long side-tails. She was wearing a bodysuit that looked like armored underwear. It was the mysterious hIE, Kouka.

She had on a bullet-proof tactical vest that showed far too much

skin, and which was stuffed with knives and firearm magazines. The amateur terrorists were eyeing the young girl in front of them uneasily, but Kouka just kept smiling.

“Oh, don’t worry about me. I may look under-equipped, but my whole body is a cybernetic replacement,” she lied. “All this bare skin is actually military-grade bulletproof material.” It appeared that she wasn’t going to tell them she was actually an hIE.

The others, who had never seen a person with full-body replacement cybernetics, were obviously relieved by this explanation, and seemed to think she would be a reliable leader. Only Kengo knew the truth about her.

Just like when she had threatened him and tossed him onto this battlefield, Kouka looked at him and grinned. “As humans, we won’t stand for them trying to automate our government,” she went on. “We won’t forgive them. That’s why we’re here today. If you see a security hIE, shoot it, because we’re the humans here.”

The infiltration unit, who had all lined up, responded with a sharp ‘Yes, ma’am!’ Aside from that, no one said a word. Their training from the past few days, combined with the weight of the guns in their arms and the atmosphere of the place, had instilled some discipline in these amateurs.

Japan in the 22nd century wasn’t the safe country it had once been. The Self Defense Force had returned to being an army, and the military industrial complex had revived. PMCs were often hired to provide security. As a licensed facility, this place Kengo and the others were in could easily get a hold of Class 3 hIEs, which had extremely lax controls on what kinds of equipment they could use, including firearms. It was a distinct possibility that Kengo and his fellow terrorists could die in a shootout. Kouka was driving a bunch of amateurs with guns onto a battlefield, without even explaining the armaments of the other side.

“Just leave the dangerous guys to me,” she said confidently. “You all just focus on destroying anything that isn’t human.”

The impromptu terrorists were pushed forward by their own hatred and senses of justice. Their feelings of disgust at a society full of hIEs had brought them to this point. Their leader, Kouka, signaled with her hands for them to follow her. Holding onto their guns, the men all followed the little red girl. Only Kengo wasn’t caught up in the heat of the moment. His whole body was shaking, and his face was pale.

Arato stood in front of the restaurant, Sunflower. Rather than going in through the front of the restaurant, he went down an alley to

the side where there was a door to the Suguri residence. Inside, behind the restaurant, as one would expect there were cardboard boxes of vegetables and other ingredients giving off a distinctive smell.

“Man, it’s been forever since I’ve been to Olga’s house,” Yuka said, peeking her head around Arato’s side. For some reason she had decided to come along, and Arato was a little worried about her. Seeing Lacia’s kidnapping must have really scared her, since she hadn’t gone to school since and seemed to be afraid of going anywhere alone.

“Are you okay? You’re not worried something like the kidnapping is going to happen again, are you?” he asked her.

“Nope. Lacia came back, and I’ve eaten some delicious food since then, so I’m all better,” she responded, showing him a smile.

Lacia, who had also come along, gently smiled back at her. “There is no cause for concern. I have not detected the presence of any suspicious persons since then,” she said.

“See? Lacia says it’s okay, too. I don’t mind if you spoil me, but don’t turn into a helicopter parent,” Yuka said. Though she was trying to show him her resilience, her gaze kept wandering. That close to a restaurant, she was unable to resist the delicious smells drifting toward them; seeing that his sister was the same as always came as a relief.

“Don’t go eating anything here,” Arato warned her. “It could be considered an eat-and-run.”

“I won’t. If I wanted anything, Olga’s dad would just give it to me anyway,” Yuka responded while kicking off her shoes.

The narrow back entryway of the Suguri household was connected to the back of the kitchen. Heading into the back of the building from the entryway, one would find the Suguris’ kitchen and living space. Olga and Kengo’s rooms were on the second floor.

“Thank you for coming,” Olga Suguri greeted them. She had inherited her light golden hair and looks from her mom, and didn’t look like Kengo at all. Still, her weak, gentle voice did remind Arato of Kengo’s kind disposition.

“Olga, let’s go get some tea,” Yuka said, looking back as she headed toward the Suguri family’s kitchen.

“But...” Olga trailed off. She was shooting worried glances at Arato. Olga was a year younger than Kengo, which made her two years older than Yuka, even though she could have passed for one of Yuka’s classmates. Normally, Yuka should have been more polite to her elders, but she spoke to everyone pretty much the same.

“Go ahead and relax and drink some tea. We’ll get things sorted out,” Arato said.

Kengo's little sister gave him a little bow. "I just can't understand how Kengo is feeling, Arato," she said.

Arato didn't really know what to say, so he let Lacia do the talking. The hIE addressed Olga's concerns. "One of the possible uses of an hIE is to utilize machines that the user is not comfortable with for them. As long as the machine in question is not overly specialized, I should be able to handle it," she said.

But Olga seemed frightened of Lacia for some reason, and avoided meeting the hIE's eyes.

Yuka took Olga by the shoulder. "Okay, we're gonna go drink some tea," she said, pushing Olga toward the kitchen as if Yuka was the host and Olga the guest, rather than the other way around.

Lacia smiled encouragingly at Arato, who looked apologetic. She wasn't a human, but she followed the Japanese human custom of removing her shoes before entering the house. Then, she quickly arranged all the shoes in the entryway properly before finally stepping up into the hall.

Kengo's house was so ancient that it seemed like a relic forgotten by time. It was over sixty years old, built during the last century. The wooden floor of the slightly dark hallway was dull, and the wallpaper looked ancient. There was no home system set up in the Suguri household, so there were switches for the lights and machines on the walls; this was a rarity these days.

Arato and Lacia walked up the stairs to the second floor. Even though the restaurant was in the same building, they didn't see Kengo's parents. From what Arato had heard, Kengo's folks didn't care much for hIEs.

Lacia tried to avoid mentioning the pain of human relationships as to not upset Arato. "To confirm: your friend broke his promise with his younger sister, and she has been unable to contact him, correct?" she asked.

They stepped into a room with tatami mat flooring. It was the first time Arato had been in his friend's room, but in a single glance he could see Kengo's passion. As if to rebel against the ancient wooden house around him, Kengo had decked his room out in machinery, with cords running to countless power strips. He even had a wireless server set up, though it looked to be second-hand. This was the only room in the house that made Arato feel like he was in the 22nd century.

"I guess this is his main computer, huh?" Arato said doubtfully. "Even though it's his family asking, I still don't feel great about pulling information out of this thing." Olga had asked for his help through Yuka. Apparently, Kengo had been staying out really late for the past week. Today, he had even said that he was going to spend the night at Arato's place.

“C’mon, man, you can’t always use my place as an excuse,” Arato muttered.

“Mr. Suguri appears to have disabled the GPS tracking in his pocket terminal,” Lacia said. “This house is not overseen by a home system, so I cannot guarantee the accuracy of this statement. But, judging by the item tags of the equipment in this room, I cannot find any trace of Mr. Suguri packing any large luggage before he left.” According to Lacia, hIE were also capable of controlling home electronics. He was impressed by how quickly she grasped the whole situation after seeing Kengo’s room for the first time.

“Yeah, he didn’t have any luggage with him when he came to school,” Arato agreed. It wasn’t a great feeling, intruding on his friend’s living space when his friend wasn’t there. He had been to the Suguri home a few times, since it was close to the high school, but never like this.

Kengo’s bed was neatly made, but he had apparently tossed his pad terminal on top of it. Lacia looked at it, and it booted up without her needing to touch it. Kengo’s desktop computer also started up at the same time, so Arato wondered if the two were connected.

“I am disabling the password,” Lacia said.

A shiver ran up Arato’s spine as he thought of the implications of what Lacia was doing. The password screen appeared, and Lacia broke through it in an instant. A program started running on the desktop computer. It showed a map of the eastern side of Tokyo all the way to the border with Chiba prefecture, an area Arato was familiar with. There were points of light scattered all over the map, as well as images of hIEs walking alone and videos of police officers.

“Lacia, what the hell is all this?” Arato asked. He didn’t understand what the map meant, but he had a very bad feeling about it.

“I believe this is the cause of your friend’s irregular behavior,” she responded, as the accessories decorating her soft hair began to shine with blue light. “I will attempt to recover as much deleted data from the disc drive as possible,” she continued. “Recovery complete. I will use a natural language search and list any e-mail data that relates to this program.”

A computer was a person’s identity; it was their wallet, and their privacy. But the security system that was supposed to protect this fundamental right of any citizen offered no resistance to Lacia, and five text e-mails popped up on the screen. Terms shared between the five e-mails were automatically highlighted in color.

“It appears that your friend is involved with the Antibody Network,” Lacia announced. “This program is used to track the movements of hIEs who have integrated with human society, as well

as police movement data. This data is compiled from information contributed by an unspecified number of informants.”

“So these guys kidnapped Kengo?” Arato asked.

“He appears to be an ally of the conspiracy. Judging from the content of the e-mails, as well as the functions of this program, I believe this group destroys lone hIEs while avoiding police detection,” Lacia responded.

Arato remembered when they had found the arm of the hIE near here, and Kengo had explained that those kinds of cases were common lately. His own friend was probably helping the guys doing that. In this room, he was seeing a side of Kengo he had never known unmasked. Kengo had probably hidden it from his family down below as well.

Lacia had stopped manipulating Kengo’s computer. “What shall we do?” she asked.

“Obviously we’re going to go look for him,” Arato answered.

She turned her clear blue eyes to him. “Kengo Suguri has committed criminal acts,” she said soberly.

Arato felt paralyzed. Of course what Kengo was doing — stealing other people’s hIEs and destroying them — was a crime. He let out a sigh. “What the hell are you doing, Kengo? I thought we were friends. Why wouldn’t you talk to me about this?” he wondered. It was a shock, having a person he thought of as a good friend hide something this big from him.

“Arato, look at this. He had my ID number bookmarked, so he could search for it at any time.” Lacia was looking at the screen that proved Kengo was involved in crime. The map on the screen was centered on Sunflower, and there was a light purple mark there, different from the other hIE tracking marks.

“When I was taken, he used this program to aid you,” Lacia said.

Once she said it, Arato understood. Kengo had been able to track Lacia’s movements when Arato was chasing the kidnapper. He had used his criminal program to help Arato out.

“I guess he’s been worrying about that ever since then,” Arato said. While he had been relaxing after the whole kidnapping thing, Kengo had probably been worried sick about the repercussions of his actions. Why hadn’t he just talked to them about it? The ancient smell and look of the Suguri house seemed to press in on Arato, the old air seeming to weigh him down.

Lacia was still silently watching the computer screen. Though she was displaying a clear, cool expression like a human might, she was still a machine.

“Are you seeing anything else interesting in there?” Arato asked her.

“Mr. Suguri’s nightly disappearances began the day after you and I encountered Kouka,” she said.

Just hearing that name made Arato’s whole body flinch with terror. The little red hIE that claimed to be Lacia’s younger sister had declared Arato unfit to be Lacia’s owner. Ever since then, Arato’s relationship with Lacia had become awkward. He understood that Lacia wasn’t human, of course, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to think of her as a tool, either.

“Would you like to utilize me?” Lacia asked, looking up at him. Her body was bathed in a red afterglow, dyeing her the same color as Kouka. Lacia was always looking to him to make these decisions, as if deciding was just what humans were expected to do.

“Please find out where Kengo is,” Arato said. For better or worse, the urgency of the situation overrode Arato’s normal hang-ups. It had been his intention to use Lacia from the beginning, ever since Olga had first asked for his help. That was the whole reason he had brought her there. He just hoped that by using her, he would be able to help Kengo. If it was for the sake of his friend, Arato could overlook his usual hesitation to use Lacia as a tool. Even if they got dragged into a fight, Arato felt this goal was worth it.

Lacia accepted Arato’s request with a smile. “Acknowledged,” she said. Arato had conveyed his will. Lacia automatically transformed that request into a list of tasks, and began to execute those tasks automatically. “Please wait for a moment. I will determine what kind of activity your friend has been caught up in,” she said.

When Ryo Kaidai got the call, he was sitting in a meeting room at MemeFrame. In front of him was a researcher older than his dad. He had been working at the Tokyo Research Labs that had been half-destroyed in the explosion the other day. Ryo had talked his dad — the president of MemeFrame — into setting up this meeting with the researcher, saying that he was thinking of his future after graduating from high school.

“Your years in high school will be the best years of your life. It’s best not to let worries cloud up your enjoyment of this time while you have it,” the researcher advised. Seeing that Ryo was getting a call, he asked if Ryo’s friends were all right.

“Please don’t worry about it. I’ll just call him back tonight,” Ryo said, rejecting the call.

The call had been from Arato. Ryo had a bad feeling that his friend had been caught up in something shady again. But, ever since Arato had picked up Lacia, strange events seemed to be happening around him more frequently, and Ryo was sure eventually it was all

going to blow up in a way they might never recover from. That was why he was here, talking to this researcher.

“It was a shock, seeing the news about the explosion at the Tokyo Research Labs,” Ryo lied. “It got me thinking about my future. A bunch of kids at my school were talking about it, too.”

The researcher, a fifty-year-old man named Shinohara, had streaks of white in his hair. He folded his arms and frowned. When he sighed, Ryo could smell tobacco on his breath. “The police are working to track down the terrorists,” Shinohara told him. “But if an incident like that can get young kids thinking about hIEs, I suppose we can call that a silver lining.”

Arato had met his Red Box hIE the night of the Tokyo Research Labs explosion. MemeFrame was the company behind the world’s leading hIE behavioral cloud, as well as Higgins, an AI with capabilities far surpassing human knowledge. It wasn’t hard to see how it was all related. And if Lacia was related to MemeFrame, that meant this Shinohara guy could also be connected.

“You were thinking of going to a college with a pseudo-human engineering program, right, Ryo?” Shinohara asked.

“I got interested in hIE behavior control after hearing about the incident at the Tokyo Research Labs, so I started looking into that kind of thing. From what I read, our system is incredibly powerful, right?” Ryo answered the question with his own.

The researcher looked down shyly at the compliment to his work, but Ryo was on the trail of what he really wanted to know.

“The hIE behavioral clouds are shared between multiple servers connected by a network, right?” Ryo went on. “That’s why, even if one server gets destroyed, another can just jump in and cover for it, so hIEs never stop working.”

Ryo projected a 3D image of a schematic he had made. It seemed to impress the researcher, who leaned in for a better look. The MemeFrame cloud network was a platform that unified the behavior programs from several different companies; it was comparable to Sony or Nintendo from the early days of video games, or MS and Apple from the PC market.

“But I heard the Tokyo Research Lab was a center that provided updates. Which is weird, since all the machinery down there got blown away but our servers still kept running normally,” Ryo continued.

MemeFrame was also the company behind AASC, the control infrastructure most behavior control programs were built around. The Tokyo Research Lab provided regular updates to the AASC, so that hIEs could continue to react in optimal ways to social situations that changed with each passing day. Considering all that, it was strange

that MemeFrames' services had kept running, even after half the Tokyo Research Lab facility had been destroyed.

"I know everyone's always been chasing after perfect data back-up and recovery methods, but how did MemeFrame pull that off?" Ryo asked, finally arriving at the question he had wanted to ask. This was important enough that he had ignored a call from his best friend. He wasn't going to let this chance to get some answers slip away.

"This is touching on some trade secrets, so it's just between us," Shinohara said. The researcher was near retirement, and had spent time as a staff member at the labs; he hadn't missed the fact that Ryo was related to his boss, Tsuyoshi Kaidai.

"The big disaster in the last century really drove home the importance of backing up our data," Shinohara told him. "Equipment's going to break down sooner or later, so we prepared some hardware that would let our data retreat from danger on its own two legs."

Ryo felt like he had just stuck the final piece into a puzzle, and the picture it showed him was a horror beyond his comprehension. The 'two legs' Shinohara was referring to were hIEs. Which meant one of those two legs was the girl Arato had picked up the other night.

Thinking of the amount of data the Tokyo Research Labs had been in charge of, the physical weight of the quantum computers and storage devices that contained it must have been incredible. Plus the AASC, including the data storage units, and the processing engine for keeping tabs on all the data in the storage units, as well as the databases for utilizing the data in the storage units, and the applications that allowed for value to be derived from the databases, all took up four entire buildings. All that hardware and software, an entire data center, had been crammed down into the black coffin that Lacia carried around.

As the carrier of that coffin, Lacia had to be prepared for an extremely difficult job. Since a major disaster would knock out the wireless recharge systems, she would need an incredibly high-capacity battery. Plus, she would need to be able to make decisions about her own actions, in case the behavioral cloud was taken offline. Her capabilities were far beyond those of any average hIE.

And, if the Red Box named Lacia had been designed by MemeFrame's super high performance AI, Higgins, everything would fit neatly into place. That must have been where Lacia and Kouka had come from.

"I definitely wasn't expecting you to use that sort of method," Ryo said.

"Oh, come now, Ryo. You've been watching our experiments and hanging around the labs ever since you were small. I must say, I'm glad you've recovered since, you know, that time," Shinohara said.

Ryo did his best to force a smile. He hadn't always hung around the labs as a kid. But, once Arato had started relying on him to be the smart one, his interest in the labs had grown. Still, he was already regretting sticking his nose into this. The Tokyo Research Labs were completely shrouded in darkness.

"So, our data succeeded in escaping," Shinohara said.

Of course, if none of the hIEs carrying the data had returned after the explosion, Ryo doubted Shinohara would be describing it as a 'success'. That meant at least one of Lacia's Red Box sisters must have been retrieved.

"I guess I should probably stop joking around about this," Ryo muttered to himself.

The air in the conference room felt heavy, and Ryo was having trouble breathing. Though, to be fair, Ryo had expected this outcome. He had thought of all the possibilities; what to do if they took him to the police, what to do if the researcher tried to hide the truth. He couldn't complain when the horrible truth came rolling effortlessly into his lap.

Another call came on Ryo's phone. It was Arato again. Ryo's bad feeling grew stronger. "I'd better see what this is about," Ryo said, excusing himself out to the hallway to take the call.

There was an unusual tension in Arato's voice. When Ryo heard what he had to say, all the blood drained from his face; Kengo had been destroying hIEs as part of the Antibody Network. Plus, he hadn't come home that day.

"So, do you know where Kengo is?" Ryo asked.

〈Lacia says he might be at the Oi Industry Promotion Center,〉 Arato said. Throughout the call, Ryo thought his friend's voice seemed more mature than normal.

"Is she sure?" Ryo asked.

〈Lacia found some memo data of Kengo's. It says they're targeting an hIE experiment happening there.〉

Ryo started to say 'take it to the police,' but stopped himself halfway. Instead, he just said, "Never mind, don't go," before falling into a stunned silence.

Lacia was a product of the Tokyo Research Labs. This meant that the researcher on the other side of the door had a deep connection with her whole situation. But, he had spilled the beans to Ryo because of Ryo's familial connections.

Ryo's mouth tasted bitter, like the tension was squeezing his organs until bile came out. He often teased Arato for not being the brightest bulb, but his friend did have the ability to follow a chain of events, from a single bit of information all the way to conclusions, that Ryo didn't want to think about. The fact that MemeFrame wasn't

openly searching for their products, the escaped Lacia-class hIEs, meant they probably didn't want the police involved with the whole thing. If it got out that they had lost control of some Red Boxes, in the worst case scenario, the executive officer of the company — Ryo's father — could be called in front of the Diet for questioning.

"Don't take this to the police yet," he repeated. The ease with which Arato agreed made goosebumps appear on Ryo's arms.

〈Got it. I figured you would say that,〉 Arato said. Then, despite having just gotten finished with that theft case, Arato added: 〈I'm going to go rescue Kengo. I figured I should let you know.〉

"What the hell man? Are you crazy? It's not like Kengo's gonna be alone. He's mixed up with some terrorists," Ryo said.

〈Kengo helped me out. This time it's my turn,〉 Arato responded simply.

Ryo's face was dripping with an uneasy sheen of sweat. He was so tense that it was starting to make his head hurt. "This is all information that hIE is feeding you," he said desperately. "That Red Box. You don't know if someone's controlling that thing. Would you even know if she was leading you on?"

It was the same as the things that hIE, Kouka, had said. If Lacia and Kouka were working together, it would be too easy for them to manipulate a human. Without any sort of proof, there was no way Arato could actually know that he wasn't being lied to.

"Sit this one out. It's pointless to throw away your life like this," Ryo said.

〈If it's 'pointless,' I just have to give it a point,〉 Arato retorted. He hadn't changed, ever since they were kids. It was because he could say things like that, without thought or hesitation, that Ryo had always hung out with him.

"This isn't the time for one of your macho one-liners," Ryo argued. "In ten years, the only job for human guys like us will be chatting up human girls. Have your hIE handle it. There's no reason for you to get involved."

〈It seems like Kengo really hates hIEs. If Lacia went after him alone, there's no way he would listen to her. It is what it is, Ryo. I've got to go,〉 Arato said.

Ryo, who always let his rationality drown out his emotions, also felt like he had been saved by Arato, who always acted on his emotions first. Still, Ryo found it hard to discuss what he had found with his friend, who was almost too good. Deep inside, Ryo knew the day would come after graduation when the two of them would take separate paths as they went out into society.

Arato cut the call.

He was looking up at the sky over the city, which was fading from evening to night. After Lacia had pulled Kengo's most likely location off of his terminal, they had rented an automatic van to drive them to Oi.

He had left Yuka at Sunflower, telling her and Olga they would bring Kengo back safe and sound. It would be a horrible lie to have told if it turned out Kengo wasn't all right. But that just strengthened Arato's resolve to bring Kengo back in one piece.

"So that's the place Kengo and his buddies are planning to go all terrorist on," Arato said. The Oi Industry Promotion Center was a government-run business building that took advantage of its location near the Haneda Airport. It was a thirty-six story tall high-tech structure with heavy security.

"I just hope they haven't started yet," Arato muttered.

The building was massive, with the lot that had once been the JR Vehicle Center being only one small corner of it.

"I switched my device to sensory mode and made a search of the building interior. I am already detecting gunshots from weapons equipped with silencers," Lacia said from her position within the van.

Arato's body froze solid as soon as he heard the word 'gunshots.' He had acted all tough on the phone with Ryo, but saying cool, heroic things was easy. Actually doing them was a different story.

He knew he was making a pathetic expression, so he gritted his teeth and slapped his face with both hands. *You aren't the only one there who's terrified*, Arato reminded himself. *Kengo's suffering way more than you are*. Plus, Arato had Lacia by his side. He had been caught up in some crazy things because of her, but he knew in his heart that she had never betrayed his trust.

Arato knew he was too quick to trust people, but he forced a smile and said the words he couldn't take back: "Well, no sense sitting here worrying. Let's go!"

And, as always, Lacia helped her thoughtless owner get closer to his goal. "It will be difficult to enter the combat zone and extract Kengo Suguri safely," she explained. "The security system within the building is still active. If we disable this system in order to enter, we will be seen by the building security as a new threat."

Arato looked down at his own body. On the way there, Lacia had him stop and buy a resin jumpsuit and gloves. He also had a motorcycle helmet to put on before he went in, which meant he would look exactly like what anyone would expect terrorist reinforcements to.

"Since our objective is to rescue Kengo Suguri, I believe it would be optimal to enter without alerting the internal security system,"

Lacia added.

The back hatch of the van opened. They had parked it in an alley behind the building. Lacia had been changing inside. Seeing her in the black and white bodysuit from the night they had first met was oddly sensational to Arato. She was a cute girl, and thinking of her as a tool, as his own tool to be exact, made blood rush to Arato's head.

"Can we do that?" Arato asked.

Using only her light blue eyes, Lacia guided Arato's eyes to the inside of the van. There, laid out haphazardly on the floor, was her black coffin with its innards expanded.

"You may remember, on the night we met I used a meta-material attack to render our targets invisible," Lacia said. Arato didn't follow, so she expanded her explanation. "We will become invisible," she said.

At Lacia's prompting, Arato put on his terminal goggles, and then the helmet. Lacia had told him that, apparently, the meta-materials with negative curvature would become unstable if applied directly to the skin due to the water content in human sweat.

The Black Monolith — Lacia's coffin — which looked almost tree-like in its expanded state, flashed twice. Once they had bathed in a film of the meta-material, light of a specific frequency would bend and flow around them. In other words, they had both become invisible from every angle. The problem was, the light redirected by the meta-material included light that would normally enter the eyes to provide vision, and Arato's field of vision went pitch black.

"Please activate your terminal goggles. The Monolith will collect sonar data and project a 3D stereo display directly to your retinas." Lacia's voice echoed out of the total darkness.

Arato opened the visor of the helmet and flipped the switch on his goggles, which started to project a monochrome world. Anything that repelled sound appeared as a stark outline against a black background. Then, as each pulse of sound passed, the objects would slowly fade from view. There was a kind of magical beauty in the transience of this black and white vision, and Arato felt like he had stepped into another world: a colorless world made of visible sound, where he walked unseen.

He let out a slow breath of admiration. "I feel like I've turned into something else," he joked. "Something not human." Looking at the monochrome world, he suddenly started to wonder if Lacia perceived the world the same way he normally did.

"Though you are invisible, you still rely on your voice to speak. This is inconvenient," Lacia decided. "I believe it would be optimal for you to utilize a transmission implant."

"I'd rather avoid surgery if I can," Arato told her.

“Very well. Please bite down on this,” Lacia said, handing him a small white object, the size of an eraser, with her invisible hand.

Arato put it in his mouth and bit down on it with his back teeth, which sank into the object as if it had been chewing gum.

“This is an underwater speaker, for use while diving. The mouthpiece speaker electrically stimulates the auditory center directly, transmitting audio directly to the brain,” Lacia explained.

“Wait, when did you buy this?” Arato asked.

“I prepared it in anticipation of just such a situation,” Lacia said. “I can understand what you say without the need for you to open your mouth and say it, so please keep your mouth shut when you talk. You wouldn’t want them finding us because they heard your voice, would you?”

〈 This is a weird time to be switching to your big sister style of talking, Lacia, 〉 Arato said, practicing his speaking without breathing.

The system guessed what he was saying based on mouth and throat movements, and converted the interpreted text into electric speech, which Arato heard over the speaker. Through the same speaker, he heard Lacia’s simulated voice echo in his head.

〈 We are about to break and enter, so please leave your pocket terminal behind. It could be used to pinpoint your location. 〉

Lacia always used a speaker to talk anyway, so she was an old hand at these secret, silent conversations. Arato handed over his pocket terminal, and Lacia cut the power and left it inside the automatic van. With that, Arato had also cut himself off from contact with the outside world.

Through the goggles, he saw Lacia as a white shape made not of light but of sound. She pulled her device out of the back of the van.

〈 With my device in sensory mode, the incoming data load is greater than I can process. In order for me to ensure that my chosen behavior is optimal, please take my hand, 〉 she said.

With one hand supporting her heavy device, Lacia hesitantly reached out her left hand. Arato took it, and he felt her narrow fingers grip his. He felt how soft she was. 〈 Aren’t we standing a little too close together? 〉 he asked.

〈 My behavior control program contains no data for optimal behavior toward a human I cannot see. Therefore, I believe it will be less burdensome for my processor to react to your movements, rather than to the outside world. Is this unpleasant for you? 〉 she asked. Lacia, who always seemed so confident in the actions she took, was relying on him. She pressed in close to him, and he smelled a sweet scent, despite her not breathing. It made his pulse race.

〈 Well, let’s make sure we’re really invisible, 〉 Arato said. Her footsteps were shaky as he escorted her out of the alley. No one

looked at them as they made their way to the Oi Industry Promotion Center; it was clear that no one could see them.

They were about to illegally trespass into a restricted building. If they were caught, Arato could be arrested. 〈If this goes wrong, they might take you away, Lacia. Are you still okay going along with me on this? It's kind of a selfish request,〉 Arato said.

〈This is something you have decided to do,〉 Lacia said, as if that explained everything. Her white audio image tilted its head slightly. A heartless hIE would never rebel against the wishes of its owner; as a tool, she saw no problem in being used for the sake of her owner's goals. The only issue was Arato's own feelings on the matter.

〈Are you sure about this, Arato?〉 Lacia asked. 〈This may very well cost you your life.〉

〈Well, we'll just have to try our best to make sure that doesn't happen,〉 Arato said. He had already heard how deadly this rescue mission was going to be, but having her call attention to the danger again made his breath catch. 〈And, in the end, what I do is up to me, right?〉 he asked.

Lacia just smiled, an analog hack to make his burden lighter. 〈Then let us say my answer is the same as yours, and leave it at that,〉 she said.

In a world of audio images, the building they were heading for looked nothing like it would to the naked eye. The surface of the building was made of white ripples, spreading floor by floor, with the 15th floor as their epicenter. That was where Kengo and his comrades were fighting.

The Oi Industry Promotion Center was an advanced information management facility. This meant that any radio waves not authorized by the facility were completely blocked out. hIEs, which were basically walking clumps of sensors and recording devices, were especially heavily restricted, considering all the spying they could do. It was an important security feature for any facility that handled highly classified information.

These sorts of controls were vital in an era where everything was connected wirelessly. All unauthorized transmissions from the outside were rejected, and you couldn't rely on any wireless equipment inside the building. On the other hand, the security inside the building were free to use all the hIEs and automated equipment they wanted. Of course, these restrictions were only meant to prevent things being brought in from the outside, so anything set up from within the building was free game.

Kengo hid himself behind a corner of the corridor, leaning against

the wall. Combat was raging all around him. The whistling of silenced gunshots, which sent bullets cutting through the air, were echoing off the walls of the corridor.

“Get me out of here. Get me the hell out of here,” Kengo begged. He looked down at his gun. His hands wouldn’t stop shaking. “Why the hell are they shooting at us?” he asked.

He was drenched in sweat. Nearby, one of his comrades, who had been shot in the legs, was dragging himself along and crying out with each movement. At first, the security forces had been using the rubber bullets they normally used for suppression. But, after the Antibody Network members used actual firearms to take down several security hIEs, the guards had switched to live rounds.

The place reeked of blood, and Kengo could see the remains of security hIEs scattered here and there in the corridor. They bore the logo mark of Shingubo; a prolific, government-subsidized drone supplier that made unmanned equipment for the Japanese army.

It almost seemed to Kengo as though his normal life from just a few hours ago, attending classes at high school, was an illusion. He had been chased into a corner, and he couldn’t shake the stomach-churning tension that had settled on his shoulders.

“This is bullshit. Sending in humans to fight just because we couldn’t use drones in here,” he cursed.

There was only one reason their team of rookies was even still alive. A piercing noise came from further down the corridor, after which the gunshots fell silent. A young girl’s relaxed voice broke the sudden stillness.

“20th floor, north side, suppressed. D-8, you got injured. Report to D2 — the sergeant — and get some painkillers. Then fall back to one of our secured routes. Sorry, that must have hurt. Good job out there,” she said. It was the red and black hIE, Kouka, that had taken down the security hIEs. She was fulfilling her role as the leader of the attack for the Antibody Network perfectly.

The D group, which included Kengo, had taken point on the infiltration. Struggling under tension and danger from every side, they had managed to make it to the 20th floor. They were exhausted. But, there had only been three injuries so far, and no casualties. Considering that they were actually being shot at, it was nothing short of a miracle.

“Everyone, move up,” Kouka ordered. “If the security folks get around behind us, I won’t be able to protect you all.”

The exhausted invasion force appeared from the shadows of the corridor. Kengo also walked out into the northern corridor, where bullet holes showed vividly on the walls. The red-haired Kouka was standing there, with a two meter tall Shingubo security hIE laying at

her feet. The blade of Kouka's massive device was piercing it.

"D-9, you'll back me up while we go to floor 21. It's the meeting reception floor, so we're almost there. We might run into some humans, so let's be careful," she said.

A chilly, itching sensation ran through the dog-collar style terminal tag that Kengo had received at the start of the mission. To get around the wireless transmission defenses of the building, they were using terminals with a 10 meter infrared transmission range. He was D-9, so his collar was letting him know that he had been chosen.

To stop the itching sensation from the collar, he stepped forward despite his reservations. Someone whistled from behind him. Apparently, some of his terrorist comrades were jealous of the attention he was getting.

"Give me a break," he spat, with a mouth that felt as dry as a bone.

Kengo, along with every other terrorist there, was just an amateur who wanted to take out his hatred toward hIEs. If Kouka hadn't been there with them, the attack would have been suppressed in an instant. Everyone there should have understood that it wouldn't have been strange for any of them to die at any time. And, if any of them could die at any time, everyone should have been wondering when it would be their own turn.

Amidst these extreme conditions, the Antibody Network members believed that if they simply followed orders, they would prevail. They stopped thinking about anything else, and obeyed Kouka blindly.

Kouka was smiling brightly, with not a drop of sweat to be seen. Her voice whispered out of Kengo's collar terminal, since he was within the ten meter infrared range. 〈You should be more friendly with the others or you'll stick out like a sore thumb,〉 she said.

Since unauthorized hIEs shouldn't be able to operate within the building, the infiltration team all believed Kouka was a dependable human commander. There was no way any of them would believe the girl standing in front of them was a Red Box that defied human understanding.

"D-9, reporting in," Kengo said, announcing himself by his number.

All the infiltration unit had done so far was work up a nice sweat running behind Kouka, who possessed battle prowess far beyond their own. The Antibody Network had outsourced their work to an hIE, who was now automating the very human act of hate-driven violence. In this blasphemous holy war, the impotent humans had to rely on machines. Insanity was swallowing Kengo's world.

〈That's a good boy. No one would believe you, even if you did try to tell them I'm not a human,〉 Kouka said as she ran toward the

emergency staircase, red hair dancing behind her.

“The police are stuck on the 1st floor, so let’s hurry. I’ll cut a path, so everyone just get up to the 22nd floor without taking any casualties, got it?” she called out to the others.

Kengo gripped his gun tightly. Among all that chaos and violence, he didn’t have the courage to draw the wrath of the others by trying to reveal Kouka as an hIE. In life-threatening situations, people tend to lose their ability to detect deception. So, just as humans used fake humans — hIEs — to do their work and make their lives easier, Kengo used fake enthusiasm to cover for himself with the rest of his team.

“Don’t get so excited you forget the rules, now,” Kouka said. “We’re only shooting hIEs.”

The men all voiced their acknowledgement. Never in their wildest dreams would they believe that Kouka, who had become the proxy for their rage, was an hIE herself.

Kouka used the blade of her giant device to cleave the door of the fire escape in two. Faster than Kengo could react, Kouka vanished through the doorway. Harsh light and heat blasted out from the door a moment later, along with gunshots, which were quickly cut short.

“D-9, fall back, quickly! Everyone, get behind the corner of the hallway and shoot,” Kouka ordered. “But don’t shoot until you’re behind cover.”

Metallic human figures burst through the smoke pouring out of the fire escape; one, two, three of them. Kengo crept away, hoping to avoid notice, but he heard footsteps chasing after him. The security hIEs had bypassed Kouka and were coming straight for Kengo and the others. Kengo knew he could be shot at any moment. His legs tangled and he fell, scraping his face along the carpet. He was most afraid that a stray bullet from his untrained comrades could hit him, so he tried to curl in on himself to make as small a target as possible.

His vision shook with the trembling of his body, but he saw a red and black girl leap out from the smoke. Despite her footfalls usually being light as a dancer’s, suddenly she kicked off the ground hard enough that Kengo heard it and felt the vibrations on the floor. Kouka easily pierced through the body armor of one of the security hIEs, skewering it from behind with her red blade.

The other two security hIEs responded immediately to Kouka’s aggressive attack, which had brought her into close proximity. They were too close for her to make a sweeping attack with her large device, so Kouka whipped out a large pistol from a hip holster and pressed it to the side of one hIE’s head. The gun didn’t have a silencer, so it roared when she pulled the trigger.

The only large security hIE still standing pointed its gun at her back. Kouka lashed out with a backward spinning kick, just grazing

the hIE's chin. An anchor pile shot out of the heel of her boot, piercing the hIE's head and ripping it clean off its shoulders.

"All done," Kouka said. Her confidence on the battlefield was almost hypnotic. Even Kengo found it hard to tear his eyes away from her awe-inspiring power and refinement.

The infiltration team, who hadn't had a chance to pull their triggers once, returned to the corridor. It was unclear what they were even there for anymore, considering Kouka's strength. Kengo felt anger bubbling up hot in his belly, and clenched his teeth.

"How the hell did it even come to this?" Kengo muttered. His rage at being caught up in this scam had been wrung out of his heart, leaving only the strong desire to flee. Society can't rot without many people desiring it. Just as Kengo was in that moment, people came to terms with situations that they felt they couldn't change. Slowly, they crumbled.

Kengo had been forced into this work under duress, and exhaustion had pushed his mind and emotions to the limit. But this whole crazy situation had come about as the result of what he thought were completely rational choices.

Looking down, he saw one of the fallen security hIEs twitching its arm. The metal hand was attempting to grasp its firearm. When he noticed that, Kengo moved. When he saw the pieces of the hIE bouncing and twitching across the floor, it took him a moment to realize what he had done: he had shot the half-broken hIE. He got a noseful of gunpowder smoke, and felt like he was going to choke. For the first time, he had destroyed an hIE with his own hands.

As he continued to jerk his finger on the trigger, bullets flew out one after another. The recoil made the barrel of his gun swing more and more wildly. At the realization that he was currently, present progressive tense, staining his hands with an actual crime, Kengo's mind froze.

"Savages." The word leaked out like a sob from his mouth. His hands were stained with savagery.

〈*Nicely done.* Sure you don't want to become my owner? I promise you'll make it out of here alive.〉 Kouka's voice whispering through Kengo's collar terminal pierced through the paralysis in his brain.

"Hell no," he said.

〈Then let's make a deal,〉 she said.

Only Kengo could hear her tempting voice among the storm of gunshots.

〈If you don't want to die, just call for me. I'll save you,〉 she said.

The hiss of silenced gunshots suddenly echoed pleasantly like

water spraying from a hose. Following Kengo's lead, the other members had begun to rain bullets on the other hIEs who were still moving. A machine that couldn't fight back was the perfect target for them to take their rage out on. They showed no sign of stopping, or pausing to wipe away the sweat that was pouring down their faces. They were completely berserk.

They destroyed these hIEs much more easily than the Antibody Network volunteers who attacked hIEs on the street, armed only with tools or blunt weapons.

"You're all looking great out there. I guess I could let you guys take the win," Kouka said. "Do you want to win?"

Everyone besides Kengo raised their voices, covering fear with exultation. "Yes!" they yelled. In reality, the ones who were truly wishing for a victory here weren't Kengo and the others there, but whoever had sent Kouka.

Kengo and the others had stopped being humans. They were just tools being used by the hIE whose orders they were taking, who was automating this victory. It made Kengo sick.

It was like Arato wasn't even a human anymore.

He crept carefully through a monochrome world, made up of visible echoes. The white stereo images of the world spread around him, drawn by a quiet noise Lacia was making. They had taken escalators for the first 15 floors, on their long journey to the 22nd, but from there they'd been forced to take the stairs.

He heard Lacia's voice directly inside his head. 〈I am sorry we cannot take the elevator,〉 she told him.

〈Nah, no problem,〉 Arato said. 〈Being invisible makes this super easy, anyway.〉

Since Lacia's device weighed over 100kg, they couldn't bring it on an elevator. Elevators were constantly monitored for weight due to their limits, so it would be easy to detect them that way, even if they were invisible.

〈It's actually pretty fun, walking around invisibly,〉 Arato added. Of course, it wouldn't be quite as fun if he got caught, but that fear just seemed to feed into an unknown, adventurous excitement within him.

Passing through the luxuriously decorated meeting reception area on the 21st floor, Arato and Lacia climbed the massive staircase toward the next floor. Two ladies were standing on one of the landings of the staircase. They kept talking, completely unaware, as Arato and Lacia passed by. The 22nd through 25th floors of the Industry Promotion Center were dedicated to large meeting halls,

which sometimes even got used for international meetings. The two ladies Arato passed by were beauties but, in his monochrome world, they just looked like unpainted dolls.

The carpet, laid out on the splendid artificial marble steps, absorbed the sound of Arato's footsteps. Lacia kept away from the ladies, afraid that her weight would make a noticeable dent in the carpet as she passed.

〈 Sorry. Please lend me your arm again, 〉 she requested, pressing in close to Arato. It seemed that the situation that put the most stress on an hIE's ability to decide on an optimal action was when they were dealing with a type of interaction for which there was no behavioral precedent in their system. So, for Lacia, sticking close to Arato and having him escort her made her behavioral decisions simpler.

"Are they still doing the experiment in the meeting room?" one of the ladies asked her companion.

"They refused landing permission for the police helicopter," her friend said.

"No way. Do they really think our security will be enough for all this?" the first woman asked with a sigh.

"The police wanted control of the wireless network in the building, so our guys told 'em no," her friend said.

Neither lady noticed a thing as Arato and Lacia slipped by less than a meter away. It really was like Arato was no longer human, but some kind of creature, hiding in the air itself.

Lacia had returned her device to its coffin-like compact state, and was holding it in both hands with the utmost care. Business-suited adults were standing around here and there by the grand stairway, talking with each other. Their voices sent vivid white ripples out through the stereo world Arato was seeing.

"These people are crazy," the woman said. "Even if they get the experiment pushed back, it'll still be done later."

Arato could smell the perfume of the ladies through his helmet. His senses were heightened by the thrill of doing something illicit. He felt so free, although the thought of being caught made his heart beat so hard that it felt like it would burst. Nonchalantly, he gazed closely at the nameplate-adorned chests of the women, and chased their tight-skirted butts with his eyes for far longer than he would have if he was visible.

〈 This whole being invisible thing is making me a lot bolder, 〉 he commented.

〈 Yes, you do seem to be enjoying being an invisible man to the fullest, owner, 〉 Lacia said.

Arato felt a chill run up his spine. For a moment, he had forgotten that Lacia was right there with him, and he started to sweat. His

fantasy was torn away, and he suddenly felt about an inch high.

Of course, Lacia didn't have feelings, so it was only through her correct example that Arato felt reprimanded. He was aware that she wasn't actually jealous, but just the thought that she could be sent his heart racing.

〈It doesn't look like Kengo and his buddies came this way,〉 Arato said.

〈An approach through the front entrance would be impossible for anyone who is not invisible,〉 Lacia said, responding to Arato's unspoken question. In other words, she gave the response Arato wanted to hear.

〈Yeah, now that you mention it, this is the place all the actual visitors come through, so it must be under crazy amounts of surveillance,〉 he agreed.

〈I imagine that the rear entrance to this area is currently locked in a fierce battle. Since there is no danger of involving visitors or staff there, the security hIEs can utilize more dangerous weapons,〉 Lacia told him.

〈So that's what's happening right now?〉 Arato asked, paling at the thought of Kengo being shot.

〈There is no need to worry,〉 Lacia said. 〈Kouka is aiding the infiltration unit from the Antibody Network.〉

Arato let Lacia automate his desire to get to where Kengo was. Apparently, the Antibody Network was relying on Kouka. It wasn't the best situation, but if it kept people from dying, Arato couldn't complain.

When they reached the top of the grand staircase, two hallways stretched out on the 22nd floor. One led directly to the meeting rooms, while the other turned into a spacious lobby area with seats and vending machines.

〈The meeting room where the experiment is being conducted is three stories tall, from the 22nd to the 24th floor. The seats are arranged along stairs, leading up the back. The 25th floor has the monitor room for the meeting room, where the staff will be watching over the experiment,〉 Lacia explained.

Kengo and his comrades were headed to the same destination, but Arato and Lacia had arrived first. Since all visible light was being bent around them, no one around noticed their presence. Even the sensitive security cameras couldn't pick them up.

〈Stop, please,〉 Lacia said. 〈Three steps ahead, the area is irradiated with x-rays to prevent anyone from carrying in dangerous materials. With the current settings, we will not be able to remain invisible.〉

Arato quickly froze. 〈So, how do we get through?〉 he asked,

strangely unphased by the obstacle.

〈I will transmit fake data,〉 Lacia replied. 〈I will display the security zone on your visual field. On my signal, you will need to cross that zone in the space of three seconds.〉 In its sensory mode, Lacia's device was transmitting more data to her than she could process completely. Despite that, being able to read the massive amount of information being transmitted within the building and rewrite some of it without stopping was truly a feat no human could hope to match.

An orange zone appeared, lying like a belt across Arato's monochrome field of view. At the same time, a timer showing 30 appeared in the air above the security zone and began to count down.

〈I have released the lock on Black Monolith's electronic warfare mode. I am now rewriting the buildings' internal system data in a perfect simulation, created in my device's virtual area. I will transcribe it to the building's internal system for exactly three seconds,〉 Lacia said. There was no cloud to tell her how to behave properly as an invisible person. All around them were people related to the experiment, waiting to see the results. There was no room for her to try to act human.

〈Give me your hand. I'll guide you to the other side,〉 Arato said, taking her soft hand and gripping it strongly in his own. The feel of her skin through her gloves excited him. Kouka had told him that Lacia's fighting was only worthless because of how her owner chose to use his tool, but Arato knew there was worth in what they were doing at that moment.

The instant the countdown hit zero, he pulled Lacia behind him and sprinted through the security zone. He was going so fast, he almost tripped over his own feet when he stopped. His helmet felt heavy.

Next to the sweat-drenched Arato, Lacia was cool and calm. She was a tireless tool, always working to help her owner draw nearer to his goals. 〈From this point forward, there are several security zones, so we will be taking a safer back route to our destination,〉 Lacia said.

A 3D map of the large meeting hall, which stretched up from the 22nd to the 25th floor, displayed on Arato's retinas. He looked at the red line indicating the route they were going to take. The destination displayed on the map startled him into speaking. 〈Hey, wait, this says our destination is right in the middle of the meeting hall.〉

〈Diet members wishing to hold secret discussions protested the use of security devices inside the meeting room. So, while the security around the room is tight, it is uncharacteristically lax inside the room itself. Once we are inside, we will be in a safe zone,〉 Lacia explained.

He felt the building shake a little; the fighting was already close

enough to feel its effects, and the rich doors to the meeting room loomed white in Arato's monochrome world.

〈Let us go. It would be convenient if someone were to open the doors from the inside for us,〉 Lacia said.

The door opened, and people began to flee from within the meeting room. Arato saw loud noises, which were sending white ripples out through the doors. Some were pale, others enraged. All of them were complaining about the unfairness of the situation, saying 'how are we supposed to keep up with that?' as they all filed out into the corridor.

But there were security hIEs guarding the doors. Each was over two meters tall, and Arato doubted they would overlook the doors mysteriously remaining open while he and Lacia snuck in.

〈You want me to get in there before the doors close after someone comes out? There's only like a five centimeter gap,〉 Arato said, coming to a stop.

〈Based on my preliminary investigation, it should be impossible for these hIEs to detect. I stand by my recommendation of entering through the front,〉 Lacia said, her voice echoing in Arato's head, giving him courage. Her preparations were perfect. He would take responsibility, and follow her guidance.

〈Well, we've come this far already. I guess I'll just have to trust you,〉 he said. Telling himself that there was nothing to worry about, he slid in beside a middle-aged man, drinking something from a disposable plastic bottle, who happened to be coming out of the door. Then, just for an instant, Arato used his fingers to stop the double doors from shutting. The security hIEs didn't notice Arato's trick, happening right under their noses.

Once inside, Arato found the meeting hall to be full of sound. At one end, a woman with fine attire stood on a raised platform. On the other end, a long, steep staircase went up nearly fifty meters, with seats to either side of it.

Arato was standing in an open space between the lowest row of the seating and the front of the raised platform. Halfway up the stairs was a door to the 23rd floor, with a door to the 24th floor at the top of the stairs. Above this door, the walls of the 25th floor were glass, allowing anyone standing there to look down on the meeting room. The corridors on the meeting hall floors of the Oi Industry Promotion Center were arranged in a square around the meeting halls.

The seats were only sparsely populated. A long-haired woman was in the middle of talking. They were in the middle of the experiment.

Arato wasn't smart by any means, but he had looked into this experiment since his dad was involved with it. The plan was to mix hIE representatives in with human representatives in local congresses.

If successful, it would be used in areas where corruption or conflict endangered the human governing council. The hIEs would act as proxy humans, repeating opinions expressed by civilians through surveys and network commentary. Up to now, it was impossible for anyone who wasn't a government expert to get their opinions and ideas presented in government meetings as either questions or bills. Arato's father was working in the NSRC — the Next-Generation Social Research Center — to automate that process.

〈So that's Mikoto,〉 Arato said, pausing to look at the woman — the hIE — on the raised platform. She was wearing a suit, and seemed to be doing her best to keep an innocent expression on her face.

“The Android Politician is a system designed to improve the quality of legislation. Currently, in Japan there has been continual feedback from the electorate that the quality of lawmakers in this country is low. This plan has been developed to counter the loss of faith in the Japanese government,” Mikoto said, her strong voice ringing out from above Arato's head.

Apparently, the topic of discussion for the experimental debate was to have Mikoto discuss with members of the government whether she was necessary or not.

Arato saw a Diet member in his thirties stand in the stairway seating. To Arato's vision, the man was a pure white statue. Through a microphone, the man raised his objection to Mikoto's speech. “Just because we've got hIEs on the council doesn't mean the quality of the human legislators will improve. Quite the opposite, in fact. If human lawmakers feel they can leave their work to the hIEs, this may actually lead to a decline in quality,” he said.

“Current political science studies predict that this will not happen,” Mikoto responded calmly. “And, should the incredibly improbable happen and quality decline, please remember that I am an hIE created for the purpose of gathering civilian opinions to maintain democracy. If the majority should ever decide that I am a hindrance to society, as the one who will automatically convey civilian opinions in the government arena, I myself will announce the prohibition of hIEs from government positions.”

Arato had read the same things Mikoto was saying in a textbook. He hadn't really understood it at the time, and it appeared the Diet members in the room also weren't convinced. Mikoto continued her speech.

“In human society, worth is decided when its members — the humans — decide ‘this thing has worth.’ Democracy is a simple but powerful system, in which members of society who support the worth decided by humans meet together to maintain and ensure that worth. It is only logical for artificial intelligence to be used to support this

system. In cryptocurrency systems, in which value is supported by common consent, automation is a prerequisite,” she said.

Several representatives stood up from their seats and left, muttering ‘enough of this.’

Regardless of whether the experiment was a success or failure, it did not appear to be going over very well with its participants. With terrorists closing in, and such a low level of debate, it was a given that many would choose to flee.

〈Kouka and her comrades are currently engaged in combat on the 21st floor,〉 Lacia said.

Arato felt someone beside him; Lacia had also infiltrated the meeting room. She was wearing a grim expression, perhaps disappointed by the lukewarm reaction of the participants in the experiment.

On the massive display behind Mikoto, ‘currently repelling intruders’ was displayed in on-screen text. The fact that the meeting room wasn’t already consumed by chaos showed how much everyone trusted the building’s security.

Just then, the furthest door, the one to the 24th floor, opened. A man with a suit that fit nicely with his chubby frame came walking down the stairs and into Arato’s monochrome world.

The man spoke. “This wasn’t a planned part of the experiment, but I see a problem with it. I’m Shinguji, the one providing the security hIE for this building,” he said.

“Understood. Please ask me a question,” Mikoto urged.

Shinguji threw out a probing question. “This isn’t the first time anyone’s tried to make an hIE government official. There’s been plenty of plans before now, but they all got quashed. I’m sure you know why, correct?”

Mikoto was perfectly fair. She would not hide information that might be damaging to her. “That is because an hIE representative cannot handle sudden changes in public opinion during times of emergency. If there are major changes in public opinion, I will always attempt to guide the government in accordance with these changes. As an example, if the public responded to a survey and requested a war, I would follow the results of that survey and lead the country in a truly foolish direction,” she responded.

The black-haired hIE did not hesitate as she laid bare her own shortcomings. “My purpose is to gather unrestricted complaints and requests from the general public. An hIE representative is nothing more nor less than a system for accumulating reactions toward the government from civilians, processing these reactions into data that can be easily stored on a computer, and bringing these reactions to the floor of a government arena. My participation in meetings such as this

one, in which I ask and answer questions, is merely a method to vocalize the hopes and disappointments of the people that cannot be cleanly reduced down to data. If the citizens are foolish, I am merely a tool for bringing that foolishness to light,” she continued.

“Wouldn’t you say that’s a defect in this system?” Shinguji asked, and Arato could hear the combative edge to his sarcasm.

Mikoto seemed neither cool nor hot in her reactions. So, when someone brought heat to the discussion, it almost seemed like their emotions were amplified in contrast to Mikoto’s calmness.

Shinguji was stubborn in his attack. “The whole concept of an hIE representative just shows how low the public’s expectations toward the government are. We automate things when we no longer care about their quality as long as a machine spits out the results we want. When we assign human work to hIEs, it means we’ve lost our faith in what humans can accomplish,” he said.

Mikoto put on a sad expression. “Automation is nothing more than humans organizing their work into a manual, and training machines to fulfill the conditions laid out in that manual on a cycle. Even in the field of customer-facing jobs, automation is something that has continued since the 20th century, in restaurant chains and franchise retail stores. To address the wider issue you are indicating, it is easier to rely on automation for a higher level of work transparency and precision than it is to expect the same of humans,” she said.

As Arato listened to her, he felt a light chill creeping up his spine. Mikoto’s defense of automation was nothing more than her gathering and summarizing the opinions of humans. Those cold words were cobbled together from the actual feelings of humans in society, regarding their fellow humans. A sadness for the world — a world where humans were deeming other humans unnecessary and replacing them with machines — spread in Arato’s heart.

〈Is this really all about what’s most convenient?〉 Arato asked philosophically. Obviously the Antibody Network believed that the automation of their world wasn’t just a matter of convenience. Enough so that they had taken up guns to resist it. He started to feel embarrassed about continuing to snoop around as an invisible man. On the second story of an old restaurant, Arato had discovered that Kengo was continuing to support the anti-hIE group Antibody Network, and now he felt like he was coming face-to-face with the reason why.

〈I do not know what you are feeling right now, Arato, but a government-funded, large-scale experiment like this should be enough of a sign that it is a next step which people deem necessary,〉 Lacia said, still standing by Arato’s side. Since the hall was their destination — the point where they would wait for the ambush — they couldn’t

just leave. 〈Arato, do you believe a fully automated world would be worthless?〉 she asked.

Arato didn't know how to answer. He wanted to stop Kengo, but he felt like he was starting to understand what his friend was fighting for.

Shinguji didn't sit down. Instead, he stood on the stairway, staring down at Mikoto. "If all it takes to replace humanity is some machines following directions, that fact gives birth to a whole slew of questions and arguments," he said. "Just as this very experiment is currently under attack."

"The Next-Generation Social Research Center is currently conducting an experiment using a complete simulation of city life to ascertain whether it would be possible to leave these aspects of human life to machines or not. Once the results of this experiment are available, they should provide an answer to your question, Mr. Shinguji," Mikoto said.

This is what Kengo and his comrades were coming to destroy. The tension at being this close to their target gave Arato goosebumps. Even looking through his monochrome stereo vision, Arato could see Shinguji's powerful presence. He felt pressure from the man like a wave of heat.

But, as it turned out, the heat wasn't just from Shinguji's intensity; the building shook, and hot gusts swirled around the room. The sound of an explosion from nearby sent tremors through the air. It was impossible for Arato to stay upright without grabbing something for support. Due to the height of the buildings, it took several long moments for the shaking to cease.

Everyone looked up.

Something was falling from above. It looked like hundreds, maybe thousands of tiny fragments of something. As the things made no sound, Arato could only see them through the vibrations of other sounds in the room. They looked like flower petals, dancing mysteriously in and out of his vision as they fell into the meeting room, which was supposed to be completely sealed off from the outside. There was no way flower petals would be falling naturally into a room over twenty stories above the ground.

Everyone in the room seemed confused. The sight was so astounding that no one was particularly panicked by it. Any tension in the room seemed to fade. But Arato, grabbing one of the falling petals, felt like he had been dunked in ice water; they were the same things that had been falling on the night he met Lacia. It was another storm of flowers with the ability to take over machines and make them go crazy.

Forgetting for a moment that he was trespassing there, Arato

started to yell out a warning. A hand gripped his and squeezed until his bones creaked. It was Lacia.

〈 The warning will come soon, without our help, 〉 she said.

Kengo and his comrades saw the rain of flowers a few minutes before Arato and Lacia were bathed in it.

They had managed to enter the 21st floor — the reception area for the meeting hall — but there, they had been stopped by heavy fire from security hIEs. The Antibody Network had come through the fire stairs. In order to be used in times of emergency, the fire stairs had easy access to the main corridor. Looking at it from a defensive perspective, if they were unable to hold off the invaders at this point, their guests would be in danger. So, the guards had solidified their defenses there.

Even Kouka, at their head, was having trouble advancing. She had solidified their hold on the fire stairs, but the Shingubo security hIEs had gathered in the hallways and meeting rooms the Antibody Network wasn't targeting, and had formed a solid defensive line.

In other words, even if she was able to pierce through their defenses there and lead Kengo and the others forward, they would be stopped by the defenses on the 22nd floor. This would allow the remainder of the 21st floor forces to take potshots at their flank and, though Kouka would probably make it out fine, Kengo and the others would be done for.

In the midst of all this, one of the exhausted volunteers said something strange. “Do you guys hear someone singing?”

Then, as vibrations started to shake the air, they turned their eyes to the walls of the building. The ceiling, floor, and walls all shook simultaneously, as if the building had been struck by a great blow, and everyone had trouble staying on their feet. They were surrounded by the sound of an explosion and shattering glass, and Kengo was thrown helplessly to the floor.

He pulled himself up in a corridor that was suddenly full of dust. The walls, made of concrete and some opaque material, had been destroyed. “Are those flowers?” he wondered.

The thick tempered glass walls of the corridor they were in should have shown them an expansive view of Oi's office buildings, but the glass was so full of cracks now that it had become half-opaque. What looked like a helicopter rotor had split through the wall and appeared to be the source of the cracking. Rubble had been scattered across the floor, making their footing unstable.

But, there was something that drew their attention even more than a helicopter rotor stabbed into the wall; it was the fact that the

metallic rotor was blooming with flowers of all colors.

The wind from outside the building was gently flowing in through the broken wall.

“What, did that thing crash into the building?” Kengo asked, staring in shock at the colorfully blooming helicopter. The rotor was still trying to spin, jerking back and forth and sending out sparks.

“Looks like a news helicopter. It slammed into the 22nd floor at pretty high speed.” At this voice the men, who had been pulling themselves up, turned and snapped to attention automatically. Kouka had returned.

Before any of them could ask what a news helicopter was doing there, Kouka continued speaking. “Looks like it worked. While security deals with evacuating the guests safely and handling that helicopter, they won’t be able to set aside enough manpower to stop us anymore,” she explained.

Members of the invasion team shot each other uneasy glances. But, as amateurs, they had decided to leave all their decisions to their leader. There was nothing for them to do but go forward.

Despite being an hIE herself, there was violence in Kouka’s voice as she spoke. “One more step, and we’ll be at the meeting room where they’ve got Mikoto. Let’s all repeat the doctrine of the Antibody Network before we go in there. Everyone, do no harm to a human! Protect the humans, and only pull your trigger if there’s an hIE in your crosshairs,” she said. Her rough words stirred the fire in the infiltration team, turning them into a mob armed with guns.

“Let’s hear it. Say it loud!” she called, stabbing her bladed device into the ground with feeling.

“The Antibody Network will defend humans, human society, and human culture!” the infiltration team repeated, at the top of their voices.

“The Antibody Network will never shoot a human!” As the members repeated the phrases together, the uncertainty in their eyes was replaced with enthusiasm. They were going to do it. They *had* to do it.

“You will only shoot at what your leader tells you to!” Kouka said. She was locking down some of their capacity to think, and solidifying their obedience. As a tool for victory, she was perfect. This machine had taken the meaning out of the fight for Kengo and his companions. But, since Kengo couldn’t hope for a more sane reality to come along and rescue him, he found himself connecting with his comrades, who were all delirious with fatigue, excitement and fear. He wanted to destroy whatever Kouka told him was okay to shoot. The thought that he was chomping at the bit to follow the orders of an hIE was mortifying.

“You there, what will you do if someone I haven’t told you to shoot comes up and punches you?” Kouka asked one of the infiltration team members with a flushed face.

“If they’re human, I will allow them to punch me without shooting!” he replied smartly.

“You pass,” Kouka said with a wide grin. All they could do was follow her. “Well then, let’s get these fireworks started!” she called, then changed her device into a powerful laser and shot the helicopter through the thick glass walls. Flames and violent wind from the explosion flew into the 21st floor.

The invasion of the 22nd floor almost seemed like a special show, with Kouka as the starring actress. With their forces divided to protect their guests from the spreading fire, the security hIEs could not stop her. She knew exactly where they would be, and shot them down with blasts from her giant laser cannon. The security hIEs tried to hide behind walls and shoot at her. Kouka drew a knife and gun from her bulletproof jacket so quickly that it seemed like sleight of hand. Her every movement was dramatic, as if her actions before had been toned down to get the infiltration team accustomed to her.

There wasn’t even time for the pincer attack from the 21st floor that they had been dreading to happen before Kouka smashed through the defenses. She showed no hesitation or sorrow for the violence. As an hIE, she had no heart. Human in nothing but form, she was almost *too* untouched by the destruction around her.

As Kengo stepped into the corridor leading to the meeting hall, the floor under his feet became carpeted, and the decor more comfortable. He also heard a rush of voices. Classy adults in suits were screaming and running. Kengo and his gun-toting friends were obviously not something these people came across in their daily lives.

“We’re not going to hurt you! The Antibody Network doesn’t shoot humans!” Kengo yelled. He doubted that anyone would believe him after they had broken through security with their guns, but he felt that he just had to say it.

“Don’t worry. We’re the allies of all humans,” he said. As one would expect, no one listened.

“Murderers!”

“Help!”

“Police!”

And gunshots continued to split through it all. Kouka was blowing away security hIEs with incredible skill. The infiltration team was being swallowed up in the chaos. Since no one seemed to want to listen, one of the infiltrators raised his gun and shot a round at the ceiling.

“Shut up!” he yelled. The civilians all crouched low, holding their

heads in fear. Only the infiltration team was left standing.

“What the hell are you doing?! This isn’t what we came here for!” Kengo shouted. He pushed himself closer to the guy firing into the ceiling. After wasting a whole clip, the man dropped his arms in exhaustion.

Kengo found the harshness of the world he was in unfair. It was always divided between those who were always suffering, and those who could enjoy their lives. Even within Japan, families like Kengo’s hadn’t seen a change in their status in one hundred years.

The door to the meeting room opened, spewing out a stream of evacuees shoving past each other in a rush to get out.

“D-6 through D-12, get into the meeting room. D-2 to D-5, guide the guests to the big stairway. Don’t even think about putting your fingers on those triggers!” Kouka ordered, while dispatching the security hIEs from close range.

Hefting her massive device, she dashed into the storm of flower petals. As if to escape from the hallway full of people who saw them not as heroes but as criminals, the infiltration team members followed her in through the door.

Kengo followed her as well, his body feeling heavy from how much sweat he had shed. He kept his eyes down, not wanting anyone to see his face. “Get me outta here,” he cried, not letting the words escape his lips for anyone to hear. He just wanted it to be over.

The flower petals were so thick in the air, it was like trying to swim through a flood of five-colored water. Kengo could barely make out anything three meters ahead. He couldn’t see the target, Mikoto. Under the circumstances, he thought it would be impossible for them to still be conducting the experiment.

A little girl in a white dress was standing in the middle of the storm of flowers. She looked about four or five years younger than Kengo’s sister Olga. He thought she might have been a grade-schooler, but the sight of her made Kengo freeze.

There was no way a girl as young as her was involved with the experiment. Plus, the way she was standing there, throwing flower petals out of her hands, was completely out of place. Her long, green hair and matching green eyes were cute, but definitely didn’t look human.

A voice Kengo recognized screamed from nearby. “Help! The flowers! They’re crawling all over me!” A member of the infiltration team was slapping at his body wildly, and Kengo dropped his gaze to his own gun. Dozens of the flower petals had grown insectoid legs, and were crawling around the mechanical portion of the firearm. Each petal was a tiny robot.

“Snowdrop’s child units won’t hurt humans. Just slap them away

if they start coming for your collar terminals. Everyone just calm down,” Kouka said, shifting the form of her bladed device.

A line of flower petals burst into flames, shot by Kouka’s high-powered laser. The soundless beam of death from Kouka’s laser caught the green-haired little girl, and the sleeve of her white dress burst into flames.

A hundred blazing flowers illuminated the meeting hall as they danced in the air, but the girl Kouka had called ‘Snowdrop’ did not fall. Instead, parts of her hair twitched like the ears of an animal. Then she touched both of her hands lightly to her own stomach.

“Come,” she murmured quietly, ignoring her own flaming clothing.

Kengo heard a metallic creaking from the entrance of the room, where the remains of the destroyed security hIEs had begun to move. They were like walking corpses, two or three units together with flower petals gathered around their broken parts. Where they gathered, the dancing petals formed full flowers.

Members of the infiltration team, half-crazed by the strangeness of the scene, fired wildly at the flowery zombies. But, no matter how many holes they punched through them, the corpses did not stop. Kouka, fearing a stray bullet might hit a human, ordered them to stop firing.

Kengo wiped sweat from his face with his sleeve. He had realized that this girl, Snowdrop, must have been the one who’d attacked Arato on the night he met Lacia. He couldn’t help comparing himself to Arato. “Endo sure is something else,” he said, feeling the tiny flower petal robots crawling on him, even under his clothes. They felt dry, as if they had come off of an artificial flower. The feeling of them swarming over him was shaking Kengo’s sanity.

“How the hell did he have time to make a contract with an hIE in a situation like this?” Kengo asked himself. It didn’t matter how hot the hIE was, or how much he trusted her, Arato’s sense of danger must have been broken. Thinking of his friend, Kengo felt the corners of his mouth twitching up in a small smile. It helped him pull himself together.

“I just have to take out that hIE, then we can go home. This whole thing is her fault,” Kengo said, raising his gun as he waded through the flower petals in search of the political opinion aggregator hIE.

There was no one on the podium, and the seating was all empty. A young woman with black hair in a red and white suit was standing under the podium, giving instructions to the evacuees. “Please stay calm! Just keep walking. The experiment has been cancelled. We will be contacting you later with a follow-up,” she said. On her head, the machine-controlling flowers had gathered like a floral crown. The

well-dressed representatives from the experiment were following her orders, using their suit coats to protect their heads.

But Kouka had told Kengo that the flowers wouldn't do anything to humans. Though they were crawling all over his body, Kengo hadn't noticed the flowers trying to congregate on his head or anything. Therefore, the woman in front of him being swarmed by the petals must be Mikoto.

Rage throbbed dully within Kengo. He and his comrades, exhausted from their long battle, had been greeted by screams. Yet the people trusted this hIE, who was automating their world, to guide them. These people had no problem following the orders of an hIE. Both the evacuees obeying Mikoto and Kengo's comrades blindly following Kouka seemed the same in Kengo's eyes. He was sick of it all.

Steadying his gun, he pointed its muzzle at Mikoto. "Everyone, open your eyes," he said into the chaos around him. "Everything dear to us is being stolen away by these things pretending to be human." He wanted to destroy them all. Even if this hatred consumed everything else, he wouldn't mind.

Arato ran over to Kengo as soon as he saw his friend point his gun at Mikoto.

〈Kengo! Stop!〉 he tried calling out. But his friend, a white demon in Arato's monochrome world, didn't hear him. Arato was still invisible and still biting down on the mouthpiece speaker.

He couldn't just leave his friend to get lost in the chaos of the moment, so he grabbed Kengo's gun from the side. Kengo, who suddenly had his aim thrown wide by an unknown force, tried to shake him off.

"What the hell?!" Kengo yelled.

Arato forced Kengo's resisting hands apart so he could tear the gun away. He was invisible, but the gun was not, and the sight of his gun floating freely in the air made Kengo freeze. Arato turned and threw it, so it landed and skittered underneath the podium.

Lacia's voice echoed in his head through the mouthpiece speaker. 〈We are currently hidden from the eyes of the other Antibody Network members by the rain of flowers. We should take him now,〉 she said.

〈If we grab him right now, like this, he'll never want to talk to me again!〉 Arato yelled back, without opening his mouth. The attack by the hIE Kouka had called 'Snowdrop' was something Arato and Lacia hadn't planned for. But Arato couldn't just ignore what was happening.

White waves of acoustic imaging flowed outward from around the little girl's stomach, which was round with baby fat. It seemed to Arato that the sound was actually coming *from* her stomach.

"Dance, dance," Snowdrop chanted, using both of her little hands to gather a pile of white petals to the stomach of her white dress before scattering them. Every time her dress moved, petals scattered from it, like feathers falling off a bird taking flight.

〈What's going on with her?〉 Arato asked.

〈I believe there is an instrument within her clothing to produce the child units. They are constructed of foaming resin, so I would wager that Snowdrop still has the means to produce many more flowers,〉 Lacia said, squeezing one of the petals between her fingers. The child units, which were light enough to float on the wind, continued to dance around in the air.

〈Hurry up and get out of here! That kid is dangerous!〉 Arato tried to warn Kengo again. He tried to open his mouth and actually yell it out, but it still didn't reach Kengo's ears.

Kengo was looking around to the left and right within his limited frame of vision. He turned to look at Kouka, possibly hoping for new orders. His movements were so mechanical and awkward, and he couldn't hear Arato's voice. To Arato, it was like they were in different, lonely worlds. He felt like they had both become something inhuman.

So, Arato decided to go back to being human. 〈We're not going to get anywhere like this. I'm taking off my helmet,〉 Arato said.

But Lacia's eternally calm, rational voice stopped him. 〈There is a possibility that you will come under attack from both Snowdrop and Kouka,〉 she said.

〈Fine, but I've got to do this. If I don't, this whole place could burn down,〉 Arato responded. The sprinklers weren't working. In fact, Arato couldn't even hear a fire alarm. Most likely, it had all been disabled by Snowdrop's flowers.

Aside from that, since Snowdrop appeared to be a Red Box, Kouka was using her laser and heated blade with wild abandon. With each attack, she filled the air with more and more burning petals, which spread fire wherever they came to rest on the carpet. The fire had probably already penetrated the carpet, and started burning the floor itself.

It was unbearably hot. Arato tried to pull his helmet off, but found that the neck area expanded when he pulled at it. No matter how he tugged, it pulled at his skin but he couldn't get it off his head. It was probably a safety feature.

〈Arato, I believe our goal here was to rescue your friend, not put a stop to the terrorist attack of the Antibody Network,〉 Lacia said.

He wasn't getting anywhere with getting the helmet off, so Arato just pulled open the visor and spat out the mouthpiece speaker. "Lacia! Put out the fire in the meeting hall," he ordered.

"You will take responsibility for whatever happens?" Lacia asked.

For a moment, Arato was mystified by the change in her voice. Since he had discarded the mouthpiece, she was no longer speaking directly into his head. "Fine!" he yelled. After a few more desperate tugs, he finally got the helmet off. Then, he peeled the retinal display goggles off his sweat-drenched face. His field of view transformed from a monochrome world where anything that didn't make noise was practically invisible to a sinister, burning garden.

"What the hell?" he said. He hadn't been able to see the light from the flames with his stereo vision, and it was bright enough to hurt his eyes. Snowdrop's petals, a silent grey before, now stood out. Each one was vivid and unique, with its own coloring.

"Snowdrop's child units have a composition very similar to living creatures, so they burn well," Lacia commented. "So, she continues to create new ones to replace those lost in the fire, which Kouka in turn continues to light on fire."

Arato saw that his head was no longer invisible, and felt like he had returned to humanity once more. "So one of them is creating endless fuel, and the other is lighting it up," Arato summarized. Looking around to see if all the humans had made it out, Arato couldn't see Kengo through the thick curtains of flowers.

"You may have forgotten this fact in the moment, but you will die if you are shot, Arato," Lacia said. She hadn't removed the meta-material rendering her invisible, and not being able to see her shook Arato's confidence.

"I'm aware of that!" he shouted.

Every member of the Antibody Network infiltration team was carrying a gun. Now that he thought about it, he found that his legs were frozen in place with fear.

"Kengo!" he called as loud as he could.

In the middle of the meeting hall, an especially huge flame was blazing. In the midst of it, Arato saw Kouka kick off of the burning carpet and rush at Snowdrop. Her blade bit into the shoulder of the eight-armed combat machine Snowdrop had created from flowers and parts from the busted security hIEs. Burning red as it cut through metal, the blade sank deep into the innards of the stitched-together creature.

Kouka then stabbed the thing with the piercing anchor that shot out of the heel of her shoe, and sent it flying with a kick. Flowing from one motion to another, she pushed off the ground with her feet and dove straight for Snowdrop. The large accessories set with green

stones that were wrapped around the little hIE girl's body stopped Kouka's shining red blade.

Snowdrop was sent flying, smashing through desks and turning expensive equipment into scrap as she flew. Like a stone skipping on the surface of a pond, she bounced three times off the desks of the seating in the hall before crumpling to the ground.

"Looks like even my device can't get through that defensive power," Kouka said, scratching her head in consternation.

At that moment, the storm of flowers that had been falling all that time stopped and vanished, as if someone had taken an eraser to the world. Arato had seen this phenomenon before. The night he met Lacia, she had rendered a large amount of the petals invisible, to prevent radio control signals from reaching them.

Snowdrop was pulling herself up. Like a puppy that had lost its toy, she swung her head back and forth, looking for her hidden child units. "Lacia's playing hide and seek," she said. Even as she spoke, more petals were pouring out of the hem of her white dress, turning the carpet beneath her into a flower garden. It was a fantastic sight, far divorced from the reality that Arato had once known.

With the storm of artificial flowers abated, Arato looked for Kengo in the meeting hall. All the other members of the infiltration team had apparently fled. Only Kengo remained, looking confused by the rapid changes to the scene around him.

"Kengo, over here!" Arato called, but Kengo still didn't notice him. Arato knew he didn't have the power to stop Kouka and Snowdrop. The only way he had gotten there at all was relying on Lacia's orders; Arato's strength was essentially meaningless. Even the fact that he was standing there on the front line at that moment was nothing but a hindrance to Lacia. But Arato still wanted his presence there to mean something.

Kengo must have noticed his voice, since he started heading toward Arato. But his head was turned to the side by Kouka, who had come to stand beside him. "Do you want to get out of here alive?" she asked. "Then become my owner. This could be our only chance to roast that little duckie over there," she said, indicating Snowdrop, who was standing barefoot on the carpet.

"Is that why you brought me here?" Kengo asked.

"Get down, please!" Lacia yelled out a warning, and Arato automatically ducked low.

Snowdrop spread both of her arms wide. "Look what else I can do," she said.

Alarm bells sounded in Arato's head, and he covered his head with both hands while burrowing down into the flowery carpet.

A blast of wind swept everything in the room off of the ground.

Arato was screaming at the top of his lungs, but he couldn't hear his own screams. A flying desk flew over his head, and the floor appeared to be rippling like water. Arato was slammed to the ground hard enough to rattle his skull, and he couldn't stop screaming. It seemed like his mind would shatter from the fear if he stopped. His vision clouded with tears, and a spasm of tension ran through his body, making all of his muscles strain taut.

When he managed to get his head up, Arato saw a wide night cityscape spreading out in front of him. Whatever had happened, it had ripped huge holes in the walls of the building, allowing him an unhindered view of Tokyo at night.

A strong wind whistled through the holes, and Snowdrop had a contented look on her face as she enjoyed the feel of the wind. The green stones set into the accessory wrapped around her delicate body — which must have been her device — were glowing.

“Lacia, are you all right? Where's Kengo?” Arato asked. He could see the now visible Lacia in front of him. She had shielded him using her coffin-shaped device.

“Snowdrop took control of a helicopter and arrived here by ramming it into the building,” Lacia explained. “Kouka destroyed that helicopter, but Snowdrop brought another one in through the hole the first one created.”

Snowdrop had noticed Lacia, and was looking at her now with a tilted head. “So your invisible stuff goes away if it gets attacked?” she asked. Then, the small green-haired girl started picking pieces of the security hIEs, who had been split right down the middle, out of the debris from the explosion. “I thought these would be strong enough for me to use for a long time.”

Arato couldn't help but see the broken machines as the corpses of soldiers, and looked away. Very little in the meeting hall retained its original form. The whole place was a pile of rubble. Looking for Kengo, Arato saw that Kouka had stuck her blade into the ground to protect the both of them. Despite her having saved him, Kengo was backing away from her.

“What the hell is all this? What do you want with me?” he asked, his voice bitter.

The changed form of the room was a chilling metaphor to Arato's eyes. In the early days, hIE hadn't needed to speak; they were just there to automate the requests of their owners. But here were three of them — Kouka, Snowdrop and Lacia — who moved humans with their forms, rather than being moved. It was one big analog hack. Kengo was only talking with Kouka because she, a machine, had brought him there and was now leading him along, controlling his actions.

“Kengo!” Arato yelled, drawing his voice from deep within. After

seeing the things Mikoto was trying to automate, Arato felt he understood Kengo's fight. He couldn't just stand by and watch his friend being manipulated. "You're always telling me hIEs aren't human. You're here to fight because you *are* human, right? So think about what you really want to do right now. If you let her string you along, everything you've done will have been pointless," Arato said. It may not have been convincing, but if Arato coming all the way there had a point, he decided it would be to say this to his friend. Of course, Arato himself still couldn't bring himself to see Lacia as nothing but a tool, so he hoped his words would get through to Kengo.

Kengo wiped his face, muddy with dust and sweat, on the sleeve of his urban camo clothing. "Shut the hell up!" he shouted at Kouka. "I hate every single one of you!" Perhaps it was an ungrateful statement, and made in a fit of rage, but Arato could tell that it was coming from Kengo's heart. Kengo had no weapon to beat Kouka down, so instead he used his words. "I don't care if you're the enemy of my enemy. That doesn't make you my friend. I want *all* of you hIEs gone!" he yelled. Then he barked a short, ironic laugh. Perhaps he was laughing at himself. His mouth twisted into a wry smile.

Arato also couldn't keep a strange smile off of his face. The circumstances weren't ideal, and the content was rough, but it was the first time his friend had expressed his true feelings.

Snowdrop hugged the wreckage of the security hIE to her chest and petted its head. "He turned you down. Poor Kouka," she said, as if to comfort the other hIE. Then, with her thin arms, she lifted the head of the security hIE up into the air. "Humans are more trouble than they're worth. They're always messing up the Frame," she said. The emerald accessory wrapped around her began to glow faintly. It stretched out its joints and came undone. It shifted in the air until it had formed a large circle in front of Snowdrop's stomach, and the green emeralds all over it relocated to the inside of the circle.

Snowdrop pulled the remains of the security hIE into the ring formed by her device, with a movement that seemed to Arato like she was hugging the scrap to her dress. The emerald crystals on her device moved like the teeth of an animal, grinding up the pieces of the security hIE with a loud crunching noise. Arato started to see the ring-shaped device as a mouth with emerald teeth, which chewed up and quickly disgorged the scrap into Snowdrop's waiting hands. She took each piece and slid it into her open dress, where it was swallowed up and vanished. Tiny bits and pieces of scrap fell from the hem of the dress like crumbs.

It seemed that only an instant had passed before Snowdrop had devoured the entire hIE in this manner. When she was done, she re-fastened the bracket that closed the chest of her dress. After letting

out a cute little burp, Snowdrop murmured, "I see now, Emerald Harmony. You use these things like this."

Arato heard the sound of rubble tumbling away from something behind him. Turning to look, he saw the muzzle of a gun peeking out from beneath a pile of destroyed desks. His instincts, which had become sharper ever since that first night he met Lacia, screamed at him. He dodged, and a bullet punched a hole through the wall where he had been standing.

Up until then, the hIEs controlled by the flowers, including the armed security hIEs, had just tried to grab their targets. But now, it seemed, Snowdrop had grasped the use of firearms.

As gunshots began to echo in the hall, Arato saw Kouka shove Kengo out of the way. Dashing to the pile of desks with incredible speed, she sliced off the muzzle of the gun, but Snowdrop had been aiming for just such an opening. A flower-covered hIE wearing a burnt flight jacket grabbed Kengo from behind. Arato realized it was the pilot hIE from the helicopter. It pulled at Kengo as he violently resisted, finally twisting the lower half of his body almost completely around to get him to move.

There was a giant hole in the wall and, through it, nothing but the night sky. Kengo vanished through the hole. Arato was running before his thoughts had time to catch up.

"Lacia, stop him!" he yelled. He ran into the strong wind blowing in from the burnt hole, heading toward the night beyond. For a moment, as he ran, he locked eyes with Snowdrop, and a shiver ran up his spine.

He knew that, somewhere, she had guns trained on him right then. All it would take was one shot. But he kept his eyes open, clenching his teeth, and put his faith in Lacia, who was there fighting alongside him.

Snowdrop went flying, together with the sound of something hard hitting something very soft. Before she could pull herself up, she was struck again. Lacia had apparently gone invisible again, and was taking advantage of having landed a surprise attack.

From the confines of the hall, Arato ran out into the open under the night sky. With each step, feelings of liberation and terror grew within him.

"Help me." He heard a voice from beyond the hole in the wall, and it told him that Kengo hadn't given up hope. He knew his friend was searching for a human hand to save him. So, not caring what lay ahead, Arato ran past concrete rubble and pieces of the destroyed helicopter. He saw fingers clinging to the outside of the thick, cracked glass walls. Kengo had just barely caught himself, and was hanging on with a drop of twenty-two stories below him.

“Hang in there!” Arato yelled. He stretched out his hand, and barely managed to catch Kengo’s wrist. It was sweaty, but it was also warm and human. After going invisible, sneaking in, and getting himself caught up in a battle, Arato had finally managed to reach his friend.

He held desperately on to Kengo’s arm, which was slippery with sweat. “You still alive?” Arato asked. Wedging his foot against the cracked wall, he pulled at Kengo’s arm until he felt like his own arms would fall off. The hIE that had tried to take a dive with Kengo had already fallen.

Kengo, despite the rescue, looked up at Arato like he was seeing a ghost.

“Hey, you’re safe, you should be happy,” Arato joked.

“You, your, head,” Kengo stammered in shock. His reaction finally reminded Arato that he probably looked very strange at the moment. He had taken the helmet off, but the rest of his body was still invisible.

“Well, just don’t let go. If you fall, you’re gonna die,” Arato said.

Wind around the building whipped up into a strong gust that washed over Arato’s body, and the scab-like meta-material coating his burnt jumpsuit was blown away. His invisibility cleared, and he returned to a more familiar form.

Kengo’s face, which had been tense with fear, relaxed. “Endo, what the hell are you doing here?” he asked. “And what are you wearing?”

Before Arato could answer, Kengo’s curious face crumpled, and he sniffled loudly. Seeing his friend break down, Arato felt like crying himself. “Duh, man. I came here to rescue you,” Arato said. He had reached out his hand to save Kengo, and their lives had been connected.

Kengo’s eyes were full of tears. “What the hell, man?! You’re such an idiot!” he shouted.

With the utmost simplicity, two hearts were moved.

Arato was exhausted, and his whole body hurt. He would be glad if he never had to experience anything like that night again. Still, he felt that there had been meaning in what had happened.

“So you really hate hIEs, huh?” Arato asked, looking down on Tokyo below, where everyone was using hIEs to automate their lives. The thought made his heart tremble, so instead, he kept tugging on Kengo’s arm as he looked up at the night sky, where the moon was looking down on the human world.

Kengo’s response, muffled by the wind, was a bit warmer than the cold night view. “Obviously I just like people better,” he said. In the year 2105, this was the automated world they were living in.

Kouka and the other hIEs were no longer talking. With no humans around, there was no one to hear them speak. Each of them was nothing more than a machine, aiming to fulfill the work they had been given. There was no need for them to communicate with other machines on their way to that goal. Or, at least, that's how it had always been.

Snowdrop was staring at the hole in the wall Arato had run to. "Mmm, it feels better when the waves can come in," she said. Normally a place that processed large amounts of data like the Oi Industry Promotion Center would restrict incoming electronic signals from outside, but the huge holes torn in the walls had done away with that protection.

Alarms were ringing. Due to the massive changes to the status of the building, the security system was in full lockdown to prevent information leaks. It was a more thorough response than there had been for an actual terrorist invasion. Every system had switched to emergency mode to protect the information that was the lifeblood of the company, and the sound of shutters slamming down echoed from the hallways.

Snowdrop raised both her hands and stretched. "I'm full, so I'm going home," she said. By devouring them, she had learned how to manipulate the armed hIEs. Apparently tired from the effort, she gave a big yawn and started walking toward the door of the meeting hall.

Lacia had stopped attacking Snowdrop. As a model, she had a well-known face, so she focused on fixing her invisibility. In the end, she didn't reveal herself to her Red Box sisters.

Without Lacia's help, Kouka decided it would be impossible trying to take down Snowdrop. Switching her work priorities, she checked the status of the Antibody Network infiltration team. Her bladed device was keeping track of each of the members through their collar terminals. Aside from Kengo Suguri, all the members of the squad in charge of the infiltration — D squad — were following D2.

As their leader, Kouka spoke to them over a wireless channel. 〈D squad, make your way to the 36th floor. B squad will secure your route down from there. Rendezvous with them and get out of here. B squad's helicopter has countermeasures in place, so it should be safe. A squad finished their ground preparations and have already withdrawn. C squad has completed their diversionary role and are withdrawing. I'm also going to take off now,〉 she said.

The orders she had gotten from the Antibody Network were to lead the members of the infiltration team and help them complete their task, so she looked around the meeting hall for Mikoto. She

found the hIE infested with Snowdrop's flowers, trying to pull herself up after being thrown down by the explosive blast of Snowdrop's attack.

Kouka re-arranged the tasks on her work list. She decided it would be possible to conduct two different jobs at the same time, and continued her voice message to her squad members. 〈If you are arrested, go ahead and tell them whatever you know about the Network. No speculation, though. Make sure it's stuff you actually know. If you understand, tap the tag of your collar terminal,〉 she ordered. Almost instantaneously, a confirmation came back from most of the terminals. Starting that day, the fight of the Antibody Network would be brought into a political light. Their destruction of hIEs would no longer be confined to busting up hIEs caught walking alone at night.

Mikoto caught sight of Kouka and smiled at her. Kouka pulled the trigger of her gun. Shot through the head, Mikoto completely stopped functioning. To those humans who still clung to the all-human world of yesteryear, she was the enemy. In order to show the world what an embarrassing heap of scrap this Mikoto was, Kouka emptied her entire clip into the hIE's body.

Her work done, Kouka whispered a gentle message to humans who were slaves to their emotions. 〈You've all done a great job. Today, you protected humanity.〉 Beyond the massive holes in the wall, the nightscape of Oi spread out before her. She saw that Arato had managed to pull Kengo Suguri up onto the 22nd floor. Both boys looked exhausted, laying on their backs and wheezing for breath.

Kouka decided she had checked all the boxes on her task list, and spoke to Lacia, who she still couldn't see. "I'll leave those two to you, dear sister." Then, she ran with light footsteps toward the night.

The boys didn't even notice her passing by. "Morons," she murmured, as she passed them by. Springing off the building, Kouka dove into the night sky. She fell.

Kouka and her sisters had each been given separate missions to fulfill that matched their unique abilities. It was amazing how different from each other they had all become in the twenty or so days since they had been released into the world. In order to adapt to the wide, wide world, Lacia-class hIE Type-001, Kouka, fell.

Though it was an unnecessary action, this machine that should have been subject to the will of others introduced herself of her own accord. "I am a tool you all need. I am the tool that ensures the victory for humanity."

Snowdrop leapt down the elevator shaft. Type-002, Snowdrop, eroded the environment humanity had created, spreading her artificial flowers wherever she went. "I am the tool you outsourced evolution

to,” she said.

In the MemeFrame building where it had all began, an orange-haired hIE that appeared to be resting on a chair opened her eyes. Type-004 confirmed her owner, and that she was in the optimal location.

“I am the tool that expands humanity,” she said.

To the naked eye, it appeared that the rubble-strewn meeting hall was empty. Type-005, Lacia, was separated from her owner, bending light to hide herself.

She said nothing, as silent as the empty room around her.

Phase5 「 Boy Meets Pornography 」

It had been one week since the night of the explosion at the MemeFrame Tokyo Research Labs.

In a mansion in the Mizonokuchi residential district, near the prefectural border of Kanagawa prefecture, several machines wearing human figures were being destroyed. Heavy thumps echoed as heads and limbs fell to the floor, contrasting with the decadent richness of the glass walls and ceiling, as well as the gorgeously ornate furnishings of the sitting room. The house was a piece of history; made during the economic bubble of the 20th century, it was over one hundred years old now.

Erika Burroughs, the daughter of the Burroughs family who owned the mansion, had often heard people in the area call it ‘the doll house.’ This was because, as the current owner of the house, Erika had all of her needs seen to by a team of hIEs and did not allow any other humans to approach the place.

Even the folks who lived in houses nearby had no idea what was going on in the Burroughs’ mansion. Erika was thorough; even when ordering deliveries, she made sure to request that only hIEs bring the packages to her home. That said, she was not the kind of slightly touched person who would destroy machines that wore human faces.

Stepping into the sitting room, Erika sighed. The sitting room where the dismemberment was occurring was used by her hIEs as a waiting area. “Apparently *this* is why my tea is late,” she observed.

Torn limbs and chopped off heads were scattered here and there around the room. However, there was no smell of blood or any sign of distress on the severed heads, which were lying on the high pile carpet. Though they looked like they belonged to humans, these were merely the remains of hIEs.

Every single one of Erika’s hIE maids and servants, each in their own special work uniforms that she had designed for them, had been broken. A dirty, solitary figure stood near an overturned glass baccarat table, in the middle of over ten hIEs worth of body parts. The figure was female, and large for a woman of her apparent age. She had ash brown hair, and her body was wrapped in nothing more than a dirty, burnt rag.

“I don’t recall placing an order for an hIE like you,” Erika said. Still, she was the owner of the mansion, so she straightened the collar

of her nightwear and went to stand in front of the unknown machine.

This hIE looked as if she had been raised by wolves, and her unwashed hair swung chaotically as she turned to look at Erika. hIEs are tools that simply react to things humans do, but this unit seemed strangely hesitant, taking no action as she watched Erika.

This machine that had broken all of Erika's dolls simply stood with her mouth half open, as if waiting expectantly for her to speak. For Erika, who had inherited the massive legacy that was the Burroughs fund, it was rare for anyone to upset her like this. She was shocked and more than a little angry at this tool that had not acted as she wished.

"What is it you're here for? You're an hIE, aren't you?" she snapped. "Well then, go ahead and kneel to me, or attack me, or whatever it is you were ordered to do." The sorry scene in the sitting room had shaken her. All the dolls she had to help ease the burden of executing the financial estate which she had inherited had been destroyed. Erika couldn't stand the thought that her beautiful doll house had been completely ruined by this ugly thing.

"Will you at least state your name?" she asked when the hIE remained silent. "I've never seen such a horrendous model."

"Lacia-class hIE, Type-003 — Saturnus," the creature with the wild ashen hair said.

"What an ugly name," Erika commented acerbically. At that time, that night, she didn't yet know the significance of the term 'Lacia-class hIE.'

Saturnus pulled a long device from beneath her tattered clothes. It looked like a hand-operated sewing machine, about a meter long. "You are someone special, are you not?" the hIE said. "I desire an owner like you."

As Saturnus had said, Erika Burroughs was considered a special person in the 22nd century. Having inherited the massive financial resources of her family, she was a well-known player in the financial market. Of course, that wasn't the only reason she was famous, but having someone come to her just because she was famous was one of her most hated pet peeves.

"I refuse," Erika said flatly. "Why on Earth would I want to keep a filthy thing like you around?"

"I am far more capable than any of the hIEs that previously served you," Saturnus pointed out, drawing nearer to Erika with that unknown tool in her hands. "Besides, not a single member of your hIE staff remains. Are you really in a position to turn me away simply because of my looks?"

Erika recalled a painting she had seen of the god Saturn, devouring his own child for fear of ruin. Considering that, she thought

the name 'Saturnus' was fitting for this ghastly machine. She felt herself being forced into a relationship with this thing that had come in and massacred all of her dolls just to make a place for itself.

"Obviously," Erika said, intending to turn Saturnus away again. "People interpret the purpose of a thing by looking at its appearance. Some may say that appearance isn't everything, but it is deeply tied to our expectations." Erika understood that hIEs were just machines. Some people believed that hIEs had personalities, but she knew it was all just humans projecting human qualities onto the things that wore human faces. Human in shape only, without a heart beating in their chests, every hIE was just the futuristic form of a picture, drawn on a page.

Pictures had been around for hundreds of years. Then, people had made them move as animations, or respond to input in games. Later, in response to the human desire to be even closer to their ideal pictures, the images had been given life-sized forms and made to be able to do the work the humans wanted them to. To Erika, all hIEs, regardless of how high-spec they may be, boiled down to that basic concept.

"If you want me to be your owner, you'll need to change your appearance to something far more attractive," she said. Honestly, she hadn't asked for this, so her words were chilly.

Saturnus obviously hadn't expected to be rejected, and she clung to the carpet listlessly, her face scrunched up like a child who had just been disowned by her parents. "Things that are not unique or special will someday be replaced. My sisters told me that I am neither special nor unique, and you have told me that you will not take me in unless I am more attractive," she said.

Her words were pathetic, but Erika saw through them. Saturnus was an hIE; a heartless machine. The whining was aimed to analog hack her, so that Saturnus could fulfill whatever her purpose might be. Still, she found herself giving it some more thought. Even if Saturnus's sorrow was just an act, it was a fact that preparing her own tea would be troublesome.

"If you want to be special, change your appearance. That's the way all girls alter their place in the world. Should you take on a more attractive appearance, I will take you in," she said.

The unknown hIE looked up at Erika worshipfully. "I will do anything you ask. I will become whatever you want me to be!" she exclaimed.

To Erika, Saturnus was an extremely suspicious machine. However, Erika hadn't particularly loved or trusted her now-destroyed hIEs, either. "Tell me your ID number," she ordered. "I'll connect you to my company's cloud." With a sigh, she got Saturnus hooked up to

her network. She figured the hIE could at least make her some tea. Plus, it was obvious to Erika that with some changes to her fashion sense, manner of speaking, and habit of dismembering other hIEs, Saturnus could be much better than she appeared at the moment.

“Saturnus—” Erika started, then stopped. “Actually, no, let’s start by getting rid of that horrible name. I’ll give you a new one.” Her eyes fell on a can of tea on the shelf of the sitting room. As it happened, the label of the tea — ‘Mariage Frères,’ a brand that had survived for hundreds of years — was the same color as the hIE’s hair. “How about Mariage?” she finally said. At the time, Erika had no idea how much her life was about to change.

The screen showed a city nightscape, with white smoke pouring out of a building that was particularly tall and wide. It was the Oi Industry Promotion Center — a large, government-owned building, set up over what used to be the old Japan Rail Vehicle Center.

The building had been invaded by terrorists from an organization known as the Antibody Network. Inside the center, the terrorists had achieved their goal of destroying the government polling hIE that was being tested there by the Next-Generation Social Research Center. During the attack, a news helicopter had crashed into the building, resulting in a fire.

It was big news.

The date was the 29th of April, the same day as the birthday of an ancient emperor of Japan, which had been revised four times before being dropped from the calendar of national holidays.

Starting with May Day, on May 1st, Japan had entered its “Golden Week,” which was a block of consecutive holidays. In some countries, May Day was known as “Labor Day” or “International Workers’ Day.” On this day celebrating the hard work of humans, the Antibody Network conducted anti-hIE protests.

Arato had been right there when the incident in the news had occurred, but only now did he really grasp how big it had been. Lacia had assured him that the incident wouldn’t have any impact on his daily life, but he couldn’t help feeling uneasy about it.

“Arato, how come you keep watching the news?” Yuka asked. “It won’t make you any smarter.” Sitting her butt down on the sofa, she opened up a game in a sub-screen of the display, angled so that only she could see it. Something good must have happened in the game she was always playing with her friends, since she squeezed her eyes shut and kicked her legs joyfully. Arato thought it must’ve been fun, living as carefree as Yuka did.

“Hey Arato, guess what? I’m *super* popular in this game,” she said.

“And I’m the dumb one here?” Arato scoffed.

A girl with light purple hair walked out of the kitchen, a plate of donuts in her hand. When she wasn’t directly needed, Lacia spent most of her time in the kitchen, making meals or handmade snacks.

Yuka immediately nabbed one of the still-hot donuts. “Lacia, you should try putting some chocolate on the donuts, too,” she suggested.

“Ms. Yuka, may I just point out that, since entering this school break, you have consumed 9,500 kilo-calories,” Lacia observed.

Without a word, Yuka passed the donut to Arato. The flavor of the oil and sugar on his tongue gave him a very American pleasure.

“Oh good,” Yuka said. “You were just hangry. Looks like you’re back to normal.”

“I’ve just got a lot on my mind. Haven’t you noticed?” Arato asked. Then he added, “This donut’s good.”

The sprinkler systems in the Oi Industry Promotion Center had come back online and put out the fire in the end. Lacia had been instrumental in getting the systems back online, as well as actually getting Kengo out of the building.

Still, Arato couldn’t bring himself to walk around outside. Every time a person even got near him, he’d jump and worry that the police were about to show up and arrest him. He kept watching the news obsessively, wondering if his own face would show up there.

The influence of the incident had been spreading ever since that night, and had loomed into something far greater than it had been at the start. Arato was starting to think that “reality” was just the meaning other people assigned to things that happened, rather than what had actually happened in the moment.

“Oh, it’s Dad,” Yuka said, returning the news broadcast to full screen. “That’s right, he said he was gonna be on the news.”

On the screen their father, Kozo Endo, was commenting on the incident. 〈 Mikoto’s hIE body was destroyed, but her data is still safely backed up on the network. Yes, we lost the data from this experiment, but that won’t have any major impact on our plan, 〉 he said.

Arato wondered how his dad would react if he found out that Arato had been there when it happened. He felt guilty that he was only now thinking of how this would all affect his Dad.

“Wow, Dad’s all important,” Yuka commented. The 3D screen was showing a small display of their father’s workplace: the Next-Generation Social Research Center, whose campus was almost as big as Tsukuba Science City. It had been constructed in an abandoned ‘new town’ — a planned community used by Japan in ages past as a countermeasure to overcrowding in the cities. There were no humans in the ‘town.’ Instead, it was populated entirely by hIEs. Some were

playing the role of humans, and some were playing the role of actual hIEs. The aim of the city-sized experiment was to see just how far human society could be automated. Apparently, there were plans to hold the international fashion biennale there the following year, but the news reports of the incident in Oi were casting doubt on the safety of the event.

Arato's thoughts wandered as he stared absently at the hIE workers on the screen, doing road work in their experiment city. "The hIEs really are working hard, aren't they?" Arato observed.

"Sure are," Yuka nodded, taking deep breaths of the delicious scent rising from the donuts.

On screen, the news report switched over from their dad to an interview with a man Arato remembered seeing in the meeting hall. It was Kimitaka Shinguji, president of the Shingubo defense company. Despite coming under fire for his company's failure to protect the Oi Industry Promotion Center, he was still an imposing figure, and standing tall.

〈The crash of the helicopter at the Oi Industry Promotion Center was the work of a hijacker unrelated to the terrorists from the Antibody Network,〉 he said. 〈We haven't heard any statements from this thug, who sacrificed the life of the reporter riding in the helicopter with them.〉

Looking straight at the camera from within the screen, Shinguji bowed his head. 〈The only thing that prevented the people running the experiment from dying in the attack was that the Antibody Network and this other thug fought each other, rather than targeting any civilians. As a defense company, this was a deeply shameful result.〉

On the news screen, reactions to the broadcast were gathered in real time from around the world through a simple yes/no system. Red and blue gradations appeared in the video: red for agreement, blue for dissent. Yuka flicked her finger at the red frame. After a moment, the results from the worldwide survey were shown. The role of the news these days was to help viewers feel reassured in opinions they agreed with, and help them reevaluate opinions they disagreed with.

〈I understand that there are those displeased with my response, but I can only tell you the truth of what happened,〉 Shinguji said animatedly, facing the responsibility of his company's failure head on.

"You really are going crazy, Arato. Why are you staring so hard at some random old guy?" Yuka asked.

"Hey! He's old, but I think he's kind of cool," Arato said defensively. "Why do you care, anyway?"

Yuka watched him suspiciously out of the corners of her eyes. It was obvious she knew something was up with him. "Fine, whatever,"

she sulked, standing and leaving the room.

With his noisy little sister gone, an almost suffocating silence descended over the living room. It prickled at Arato's heart. "She was just trying to cheer me up," he murmured to himself. He hadn't told her that he had been there when the terrorist incident went down, but knew she could sense that something was wrong with him.

Lacia took Yuka's position at Arato's side on the couch. "There is no need to worry," she said. "None of the cameras in that building captured any images of your face. The police will not be looking for you." As an hIE, she had perceived that he required some comforting. Honestly, it was a little embarrassing being read like that, but he knew Lacia wasn't holding it over him or anything. It seemed silly to feel any embarrassment in front of a girl when they had risked their lives together.

"The person in the helicopter died, didn't they." Arato said. It wasn't a question. Though the pilot was an hIE, the reporter in the helicopter had been a human. Their life had been sacrificed in the attack. "Snowdrop killed them," he said.

That night, for the first time, Arato had faced an hIE who had murdered a human. And it wasn't just that little green girl, either. Kouka had given weapons to Kengo and his comrades and made them infiltrate that building. There had even been moments when Lacia had shown her heartless side.

"Snowdrop must have an owner. They must be a real piece of work," Arato speculated. He hadn't thought about it much in the heat of the moment, but the battle he'd witnessed between Lacia's sisters probably had a much deeper, darker meaning than what he had seen there.

"We hIEs are tools, so Snowdrop must be carrying out the intentions of her owner," Lacia agreed. "However, I do not believe it would be easy to obtain information on who that may be." Lacia had already told him she didn't know anything about her 'sisters,' the other Lacia-class hIEs. Since she couldn't tell him anything about them, there was no telling what would happen with them in the future.

If Lacia was a representative of the Red Boxes — technology beyond human comprehension — there was no way Arato could understand the actions of other machines just like her. He didn't even know if he was using Lacia in the right way. What he did know was expecting his daily life with Lacia to continue the way it had been, when he didn't even know if he could control her, was foolish.

"I guess that would be too much to ask," Arato said, responding to his own thoughts. He wanted to know more about the hIEs; even if they didn't have hearts, they had moved his.

Arato wondered about Snowdrop's owner. What kind of person would use her this way? And what was Kouka's owner thinking, involving her in the Antibody Network like that? What kind of goals were these people aiming for, using their tools like that?

"So anyway, Arato's been acting really weird lately," Yuka said. It was the latter half of Golden Week, and she was sitting in a cafe near Suidobashi, hoping to hear about the Oi terrorist incident from someone closer to it.

"I guess this time you're coming to me for help, huh?" Olga said. The last time they had spoken, Olga had been requesting help tracking down her brother.

Olga had her eyes down now, watching the ripples in her tea. Her soft hair was held back with a plastic clip made to look like a dragonfly. Despite having obviously foreign blonde hair, she liked wearing it in Japanese styles.

"So, how's Kenny doing?" Yuka asked.

"You gave my brother a nickname?" Olga asked in return. She was the kind of little sister that would cry if Kengo stayed out too late. If she told Yuka about all the commotion around Kengo's late night disappearances, Yuka would definitely say that Kengo must have been meeting with his girlfriend. So instead, she avoided the subject.

"Hey, don't get upset. Anyone who gives me food is family. Ryo's family too," Yuka said.

Shiori Kaidai, the third girl with them, sipped daintily at her Russian tea and let out a sigh before saying, "You seem to get along well with him, Yuka."

Yuka couldn't believe that one of her brother's friends had a little sister like Shiori, who was pretty with a strong brow. "Ryo's family because he keeps a bunch of candy in his bag and gives me some whenever he runs out of stuff to say," Yuka said.

Shiori had invited the other two, offering to pay the tab so she could introduce them to a high end cafe. Yuka thought it was very mature of her, making the reservation and everything. She had never met another girl who went this far out of her way when hanging out with fellow girls.

Tilting her head, Shiori let her long, well-kept black hair flow over her shoulder. "Well, that's nice of him. He won't even sit down and have tea with us at home," she said.

"I think perhaps he may just be hiding his true feelings, is he not?" Yuka asked, awkwardly trying to sound refined like Shiori did. "I have never heard of someone not having tea in their own house."

Shiori gave Yuka a wide-eyed glance. Then, her expression

softened. "I suppose. Sadly, I have been too dense to pick up on it," she said with a cute, dreamy laugh.

"My brother doesn't do much with us, either," Olga said, hurriedly backing up Shiori. "Unlike Arato, he won't just do anything I ask him to."

Yuka felt like Olga was scolding her for not being sensitive about the issues that might be going on within a rich family like the Kaidais. "Hey, that makes it sound like Arato's my slave or something!" she exclaimed. "You should be more grateful, Olga. He went all the way to your house when you needed help."

"Actually," Shiori interrupted, "I was interested in hearing about that particular incident, myself." It was Shiori who had invited them all there, so she controlled the flow of the conversation.

"Well, it really wasn't that interesting," Olga said, immediately responding to Shiori's request. "Kengo just came back really late that night, and Mom and Dad got mad at him. Yuka's brother actually brought him home. He said Kengo went to Shibuya for some work from the Arubaito Network," she explained.

"Oh, I've heard of that. It seems very convenient," Shiori said.

'Arubaito' was the Japanese term for a part-time job. The Arubaito Network was a job-hunting service that would track user locations through their pocket terminals, and let them know when there was a job nearby they could do. Apparently it was convenient for the hiring side as well, for quickly filling in light work openings. Some people were against it, saying it treated workers like goods to be swapped around. But, since it streamlined all the necessary paperwork, it really was useful for filling last-minute gaps in the workforce.

"I wonder how much one could make after a week of work," Shiori wondered aloud.

Yuka figured that Shiori had never had any experience with part-time work, and showed Shiori the Arubaito Network page on her pocket terminal. Within a 100-meter radius of the sunny Suidobashi cafe where they sat, there were over fifty jobs that Yuka could do.

"But honestly, was Kengo *really* out working that whole time? Until that late? I asked him, but he wouldn't tell me anything," Olga sighed.

Yuka wanted to sigh herself. When Kengo and Arato had showed up, they had been covered all over in scrapes and cuts. Olga had cried the whole time, until Yuka and Arato had no choice but to beat a hasty retreat. "You've just gotta be more persistent," she urged.

"But what if it's something I really don't want to hear after all?" Olga asked plaintively.

"You've gotta be bold, Olga. You've gotta go full bulldog," Yuka insisted. "Don't let go 'til you've got your answers."

“What?” Olga seemed confused by Yuka’s strange analogy.

“I mean, don’t get all worried about how he’s gonna take it and clam up,” Yuka explained. “If he’s doing stuff that worries you, you have to talk to him about it, or he’ll just keep doing it.”

“But what if he thinks I’m just nagging him and gets angry at me?” Olga asked.

“Sometimes pestering is how family members show their love,” Yuka told her. “Just like how I’m here talking to you guys about how my brother’s been strange lately. That’s my way of pestering my family. Wait, no, that’s not right. What were we talking about?”

Olga was giving Yuka a very pitying look.

“Anyway,” Yuka stammered, trying to get back on track, “We’ve just gotta be tough bitches!”

“I think you’re a cute bitch, Yuka,” Olga said. Despite the refined feeling she gave off, Olga seemed to have no problem following Yuka down the strange, slang rabbit hole.

“We are getting odd stares from the tables around us,” Shiori pointed out.

“You should pester Ryo too, Shiori. I don’t think there’s anyone in the world that actually dislikes their family worrying about them,” Yuka suggested. To Yuka, it was the answer to everything, but Shiori drew down her lovely eyebrows.

“It takes talent to deal with one’s family the way you do, Yuka,” Shiori said. “Riding the thin line between upsetting them or having them see through your actions takes an impressive amount of intuition. He may not seem like it, but my brother was actually considered a prodigy when he was younger.”

“Huh, I didn’t know he had a reputation,” Yuka said.

“He was incredible, up until he met your brother, Yuka,” Shiori said. “No matter what he did, no one could come close to being as good as him. Everyone was always comparing me to him.”

Yuka was surprised by how frankly the normally refined, older Shiori was talking about her true feelings. “Your brother’s been coming to our place for like 10 years,” she commented. “I never thought he seemed *that* amazing.”

“It has been 10 years, hasn’t it?” Shiori murmured. Then, as if to regain her composure, she gently lifted her teacup and took a sip of tea. Yuka tried to think what she had been doing 10 years ago, but she had been four at the time so she couldn’t remember anything.

“I do wish he would be more like your brother though, Yuka,” Shiori said.

“Seriously? You want another Arato?” Yuka asked.

“Your brother is easy to understand, and he always just focuses on one thing,” Shiori said. “Sorry, I don’t mean this in a bad way, but he

reminds me of a loyal shiba dog.”

Yuka realized her friends were seeing Arato as the nice guy next door; a good friend, but not really romanceable. Plus, even they could tell how easy he was to manipulate. She was starting to worry about her brother’s future as a man.

“We used to have a dog, actually. I wonder what happened to it,” Yuka wondered aloud. She watched the reactions of the other two. Olga’s eyes slid away from hers.

“Why the heck aren’t you two listening to me?” Yuka fumed. “My idiot brother, who shouldn’t be able to hide anything from me, all of a sudden has some big secret. What’s up with that?!”

The meeting of the little sisters was falling apart, and one of the girls slid a plate of chocolates across the table to Yuka as an apology. Treating this as only natural, Yuka immediately began to eat it. While she chewed on the treat, Shiori shifted the direction of the conversation.

“How is your brother doing, anyway? You have an hIE at your house now, right?” she asked. “I can’t imagine what it’s like living with an hIE that was chosen as a model.”

“Arato’s a moron, so he’s head over heels for her,” Yuka said.

“He really is,” Olga agreed. She had met Lacia in person just the other day, and just thinking about it made her smile a little.

Shiori was a little more dubious. “We’ve got hIEs at home,” she said. “Their manner of speaking and acting is nothing like a human’s.”

Yuka knew Lacia was different from other, ordinary hIEs, but she couldn’t quite put that difference into words that would explain.

“Arato’s the type who doesn’t really think too much about whether someone is a person or a robot,” she said. “It’s sort of like, you can’t blame a fish for biting a fishing lure. ‘Cause they’re a fish.”

Sometimes it looked like Lacia was doing everything she could to make Arato fall for her. But Yuka didn’t think an hIE would really do something like that. “Seriously, what’s going on?” she murmured. “Is Arato just being stupid?”

“I think you’re a good pair, in that department,” Olga said.

“Maybe he’s just stuck thinking about Lacia?” Yuka said, continuing to ask questions without answers, and ignoring the slight against her.

“Well, I suppose a fish doesn’t differentiate between ‘real’ food and lures either,” Shiori said, her voice a musical, musing mutter. It was such a nice voice that Yuka didn’t really care that she was speaking without any real interest in helping to answer her question. Since Yuka had first met her, Shiori was always refined and clearly showed the gap in age between them. So any time Shiori looked at her, she shied away.

“I would never fall in love with anyone or anything without careful consideration and weighing the pros and cons,” Shiori said. “This whole world is run by hIEs now. Us humans don’t have much left to do, so I at least want to work hard at romance.”

“Well, yeah, but I don’t want to have that happen all of a sudden, either,” Yuka put in. “If I’m gonna be fighting for love, I at least want to make sure I wind up happy in the end.”

“Aw Yuka, you’re such a cute little bitch,” Olga repeated. She really didn’t hold back when it came to Yuka, who honestly wanted to see how Kengo would react if he heard his shy little sister saying things like that.

“Well, it’s not like the world is fair or anything, so the fight for love doesn’t have to be fair either,” Yuka said, pouting a little.

“It is unfair. And cruel. That’s about the one thing we can still work hard at these days,” Shiori said, setting down her teacup.

Yuka noticed that Shiori had surprisingly drained her entire cup.

“Why don’t you invite your brother next time we get together, Yuka?” Shiori suggested. Yuka was so surprised by how sweet Shiori suddenly sounded, and thought she might have imagined Shiori’s words.

“Are you serious, Shiori?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s fine to have him along now and then. He’s about the only boy I know who tells me I’m beautiful every time he sees me,” Shiori said.

Their eyes met, and Yuka noticed a little blush on Shiori’s cheeks. Now that she really looked at Shiori, it was clear that she had chosen the cool, sheer dress she had on today with the intent of drawing the eyes of men.

Within her small bag, Yuka felt her pocket terminal vibrate, but before she could take it out, she saw Arato. He was walking with Lacia from around the moat of Edo Castle, which was nearby.

“Oh, it’s Arato,” Yuka said. He was wearing a new pair of jeans and a fancy t-shirt, and even a new pair of shoes. Yuka wondered if Lacia had picked them all out for him. It was strange, seeing her usually laid-back brother in such a cool outfit.

Olga, who had just gotten done saying all sorts of things about Arato, put her hands together apologetically when she saw him.

“What, you praying to me or something?” he asked, seeing her pose.

“Well, I would say you have some divine qualities,” Shiori said, looking at Arato with a smile.

Arato’s cheeks colored a little at the compliment. “Looks like I got myself a reputation,” he commented shyly.

After meeting with Yuka and her friends, Arato rented an automatic car and headed to the Fabion office in Ebisu.

He couldn't stop thinking about the way the girls had been acting, though. Before he'd brought Kengo home, the two of them had hammered out a story to cover their tracks. When he heard Yuka was meeting with Kengo and Ryo's little sisters, he figured it would be a good chance to check their reactions and see if the deception was working. But there had been something strange about them. Shiori had always been a nice kid, so her reaction seemed normal. There was something off about how big of a deal Olga had made of it, though, considering that he had just walked her brother home.

"It was seriously like she was seeing an angel," Arato murmured.

"Perhaps it is as you heard; you have some divine qualities," Lacia said with a gentle smile.

They pulled up to the offices of Fabion MG — a company that produced numerous human and hIE models — and found a crowd of people waiting for them. These were all staff who were there to help Lacia.

One of the mobile desks in the office had become Arato's regular seat. Lacia was working on his behalf, fulfilling a contract he had signed. He bore all the rights and responsibilities for what she did, and it was his signature that sealed any deals involving her.

To his left sat Lacia, and to his right sat a woman who looked young enough to still be in college. The woman was Asuna Kisaragi, Lacia's manager at Fabion MG.

"Come on, let's see some more excitement," she was saying. "An installation means megabucks." An installation was a model show with a set that took place in a chosen location. The entire location was brought to life and made a part of the show to convey a theme to the guests.

There was a projection of an old room in the center of the office, with shafts of light leaking in through the ceiling. That image was overlaid with an aerial photo of the location, which looked like part of a western-style mansion.

The "mansion" was actually the old site of a seaside annex of the former Tokyo Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology Center. It was in an area that had been destroyed in the Hazard during the 21st century.

"Isn't that place off-limits?" Arato asked.

There were places in the former Tokyo seaside area — which was now the No. 1 Landfill Island— that were blocked off due to instability of the ground. The Institute of Advanced Industrial Science

and Technology, off to the side of the road near the gulf station, was famously one of the places that had been fenced off.

“If you fill out forms with the police, they’ll let you film there,” Asuna explained. “Of course, the building is about ready to collapse, so if we really want to get a bunch of guests in there we’ll need to do some repairs first.” The 3D image matched her words; the walls were falling apart, and the ground was visible through the horribly cracked floor. Six chairs were scattered around the room, which was dreary from decades of neglect.

A short robot, whose arms were just a little longer than her legs, was standing in front of the nearest wooden chair. Her semi-long black hair matched her childish face perfectly, and her round head rested on a body like a black and silver toy. Her skin was rough. It was made of resin, and not intended to weather the march of the years. Her eyes were white and cloudy, possibly because of the light reflecting off of them.

The director of the show, a kind-looking middle-aged man, pointed at the robot, which was labeled ‘HRP-4C Mimu.’ “Mimu was created to work alongside humans a hundred years ago at the Tokyo Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology, our stage. Her motors were weak, and they made her arms too thin, so she couldn’t carry anything heavy. But she could walk around and do simple things, so they had her work as a model,” he explained.

Further back, there was another chair with a similar design but different materials, sitting at a slightly off-kilter angle. A white plastic robot without a nose or eyes was resting on it. This one was Nadia, the world’s very first robot created for use in the average household. Thanks to her metallic, artificial musculature, she was capable of lifting objects up to 80 kg. At the time, the abilities of a home-use robot were governed by the amount of working power it could wield with any of its various parts. The focus of the time was to see how much power a company could fit into a robot for the home. Under the old behavior systems, which relied on each task being input so the robot could follow a set trajectory, there was danger of humans being injured when they got in the way of the robot’s movements. The simple ability to freely sit down in chairs was listed as one of Nadia’s special traits.

“We can guide the guests starting from Mimu, and have them experience the history of humanoid robots,” the director said, his voice full of confidence.

Beyond Nadia, the very first hIE, Marie, was seated in an apron dress. Her caption stated that hIEs had marked a return to the concept of controlling machines using satellite signals. In the earlier age of robots that focused on work power and direct programming, machines

working in the same area were often forced into choices that put major strain on their processing capabilities. As a result, when it became the norm for robots and humans to work in the same areas, there were many incidents of robots crashing into each other or interrupting each other's work.

Mankind had to wait until the latter half of the 21st century before this fatal flaw was resolved. By creating a dynamic orbital system that could adapt the movements of multiple units at the same time, humans were able to create hIEs — robots that could more perfectly mimic human actions to efficiently carry out any needed household work.

The hIE sitting on the four-legged chair had a face that was no different from a human's.

"In 2068, America and Japan got together to change the laws about hIE appearance," Asuna quietly explained to Arato. "Before that, each model had to share the same face. But, after they changed the law, a dealer could swap out the faces of the machines they sold as long as they registered it all with the government. They got rid of all the markings hIEs used to have on their faces, too, so they finally ended up looking exactly like us."

Asuna didn't look like much of a scholar, but she had actually studied hIEs in college and was quite the expert on them.

"Beyond her, we have Humanize-W, which was when hIEs shifted to total cloud control," the director continued. "At that time, hIEs started to use both their onboard AI as well as an external network to control their actions. This was where hIEs really took off, and reliance on wireless communication with the cloud became an everyday thing. It happened in 2083, the same year MemeFrame's Higgins AI became the 31st to surpass the capabilities of human intelligence."

Finally, at the furthest point of the room on a chair with a long backrest like a throne, sat Lacia. The scene was arranged as if to indicate Lacia as the epitome of the hundred-year history and evolution of humanoid robots and their integration with human society. In the image, Lacia arose and walked toward the camera. As she passed by each of the other robots, it seemed to Arato as though she were walking back through history itself.

Lacia reached a door on the side of the image closest to Arato and opened it. On the other side was a normal apartment. Arato had heard it said that the home environment was an important aspect of the fashion industry; here, the viewer was presented with a room full of light, with brightly colored interior decoration. Along with Lacia's gentle smile, the room seemed to promise a dream-like daily life. It was close to what Arato already experienced at home, but at the same time it was obviously fake. The juxtaposition of the two feelings made

him uneasy.

The image suddenly stopped, and the show's director turned to Arato. "So, Mr. Owner, are you okay with this for tomorrow's show?" he asked.

"Sure, it looks fine," Arato said, and then cursed himself for agreeing so easily. He had spoken before thinking, thanks to the relaxed atmosphere in the room.

Arato and Lacia had been called there that day to discuss the new show Fabion MG was putting on. The problem was that Arato couldn't bring himself to agree to what they were proposing.

"Oh, come on, Arato. You still have a problem with it?" Asuna sighed, lightly grabbing his shoulder. Fabion MG was looking to make Lacia one of their biggest stars.

"I'm just worried about this whole 'boy meets girl' concept you're using for the promotion," Arato said. He himself didn't really have a problem with it, but he felt there was something off about the idea of using human and hIE romance as a selling point. If you were a young guy and you bought a female hIE, most of your neighbors would think you weren't having any luck with meeting real girls. Ryo was a good example of that kind of thinking; he always wanted to keep a clear divide between hIEs and humans.

But as the producer of the plan, Asuna was dead set on the idea. "Lacia doesn't just appeal to a certain audience," she argued. "She has almost universal support. With clothing models, you want to aim for support from the folks who'll be buying the clothes she's selling. Using Lacia for that sort of thing would be a waste."

"Okay," Arato said. "But doing a 'boy meets girl' scenario with an hIE is going to piss off a lot of people."

"We're trying to sell a lifestyle here," Asuna said. "Don't you think the whole 'boys shouldn't be buying girl hIEs' thing is old-fashioned in this day and age? If the world hasn't quite caught up with technology yet, this is our big chance to aim for that gap and fill it. We'll light a fire under the womens' magazines and use that as a springboard to really take off."

"Yeah, but we're going to be the targets of all the backlash," Arato complained. He would be leaving Lacia vulnerable to the slings and arrows of media outcry from the TV networks and the internet. Of course, as her owner, he'd be catching some of that, too. Society was starting to overflow with pressure to reject a future automated by hIEs; Kengo and his friends taking up arms for the Antibody Network weren't an aberration. They were a sign of the times.

"I mean, Lacia *just* got kidnapped," Arato added. She had been hit by a car and grabbed right in front of their apartment. If Lacia really did this show, they might have the Antibody Network kicking in their

door next.

“I promise you, we won’t let anything like that happen again,” Asuna said, showing her mature side.

“Everyone wants something they can dream of,” she went on, a serious light in her eyes as she spoke warmly of her own dreams. “I want people to get used to Lacia as a character, so then we can start to sell products connected to her. I want to sell people the Lacia lifestyle.”

As she spoke, the 3D display started showing a catalog. “We’ve already got sponsors lining up to make stuff like this,” she told him. The catalog displayed makeup and bath chemicals that they were going to have Lacia use, and then sell to her human fans.

Lacia herself added to Asuna’s pitch. “This is a strategy to entice single hIE users to purchase high-class consumables for two. To open the way for this sales push, we will first aim at media normally consumed by women, to lower their resistance to the concept. By creating a more relaxed view on men owning female hIEs in the female community, it will allow men to feel more comfortable enjoying this lifestyle,” she said.

Arato still wasn’t buying it. “Okay, so you’ve got a good pitch, but what does that have to do with ‘boy meets girl’?” he asked.

“We need to spread awareness of this kind of lifestyle to our customers,” Asuna said. “We humans still don’t have much experience in living with hIEs. We need to make this as normal as a guy obsessing over his car. You see that all the time, right? Older guys, pouring time and money into their beloved ride? Don’t you think it’d be wonderful if folks put that kind of love into their hIEs? We’ve already talked with Stylus about putting our all into making Lacia a star for the next ten years.”

Arato’s head spun at the sheer size of Asuna’s plans. She was already making deals with high-end American hIE makers. “What did Stylus say when you talked to them?” he asked.

“They said ‘okay,’” she said, giving him a thumbs-up. “Just like with the makers of classic automobiles, hIE makers who believe in their craft are all too happy to connect with their fans for centuries. And once we’ve created the image of hIEs being life-long partners, folks won’t hesitate to buy high-end consumable goods for them.”

It seemed that Asuna had thought of everything. Arato was impressed with how much better an adult was at getting everything arranged, from the tiniest details to the biggest agreements.

“And, starting with our ‘boy meets girl’ concept, where male customers can dream of meeting a female hIE just the way you and Lacia met, we’ll move on to doing the same with male hIEs. If we can drum up interest for male hIEs among female users, that could make it

a lot easier for us to make this whole lifestyle a thing. Think about it: ladies don't want to come home from work to an empty house any more than guys do," she said.

Forget being impressed: Arato was in awe of her passion as a saleswoman.

Blueprints for pitching Lacia to the world were laid out in front of them. The whole plan was a challenge to the world, showing everyone exactly how valuable hIEs could be. The vision for this project went beyond what people might think about what was right or wrong; it aimed to paralyze those who saw it by its sheer sense of scale. What Arato felt while he looked at the plan was history. It was the history of human and robot relations, flowing out from the Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology, where the show would be held.

"Well, setting aside all that grand talk, we can at least say you're okay with the show itself, right?" Asuna asked. "In the world of hIE modeling, the early bird gets the worm. I probably freaked you out a bit with all these big plans, but I just want you to know how serious Fabion is about this." She spoke from experience. Having graduated with a major in Pseudo-Human Engineering, she knew what she was talking about.

"Listen, the fact that you're worried about Lacia shows how much you care for her," Asuna continued. "But if we give the world a model of this lifestyle that they can accept, it'll give courage to other guys out there just like you, who have hIEs they care about."

"May I add something, owner?" Lacia asked. Arato didn't miss the significance of her switching back to calling him 'owner' rather than by name. She was obviously placing a lot of importance on what she was about to say. "You appear to be worried that I will be 'the target of backlash,' as you put it. However, this worry is meaningless. I am your tool, to use however you see fit," she said.

What she was saying was correct, but that was no help for Arato, whose heart she had moved. He felt his emotions boiling up deep inside. What was he supposed to do?

As though she had heard the voice screaming in his heart, she smiled gently at him. "I have no heart, owner. You should do with me whatever you wish," she said.

There was a knock at the door.

Arato found that odd. In this day and age, there were a number of other ways to call someone's attention. Whoever it was could have sent a message to Asuna's terminal, or called over the office intercom system, or sent a message to display on the 3D projection in the room.

But Asuna seemed to understand the meaning behind the knock, as she paled and hurried to stand. She wasn't alone; the Fabion members and the director of the show all jumped to their feet as well.

Even though the door could obviously be opened automatically, Asuna ran over to open it herself. In this age where almost nothing was done by hand, Arato felt like he had suddenly been pulled one hundred years back in time.

When Asuna opened the door, a girl walked in, as if the whole thing was perfectly normal. Arato couldn't even get a good look at her face or body before his eyes were drawn to the black lace flowing out of her dress. She was wearing a classic dress that Arato had only ever seen in old period dramas or movies.

The girl tilted her head slightly, ruffling the one spot of white lace at the dress's throat. She looked at Arato from beneath locks of hair so platinum blonde that they almost seemed white. Her eyes were a beautiful green, and her skin was the golden brown of milky caramel.

"Do I really look so odd?" she asked him. "Even in the 21st century, there were still those who wore clothes such as these." She appeared to be close in age to Arato, but she looked like a high-quality doll as she greeted him.

"Good afternoon," she said. Then, looking at the 3D display, "It hasn't even been a hundred years, yet it's as if we're living in a completely different world now." Then, as if dismissing the work they were doing as trivial, she commanded, "Turn that off."

Someone shut the machine off, and the display vanished. The girl swept her strong gaze over the room, which had been robbed of most of its light and color; without the 3D projection, the office became a boring room with nothing but a few chairs and tables. When her eyes passed over the people there, Arato got the sense that she felt like she was the only real human in the room.

"I'm Arato Endo, Lacia's owner. I got called out here to talk about a show for her," he said, breaking through the girl's absolute control over the room.

"Of course. You're a human, so you always introduce yourself first. It would be rude of me not to respond in kind," she said, pulling a small leather case out of her bag. She handed him something white from within the case, and he was surprised to see it was a paper business card. "I am Erika Burroughs," she said.

Arato awkwardly accepted the card, then fumbled in his pocket for his terminal to give her his ID. Asuna stopped him though, touching his arm with her fingers. "Arato, the owner doesn't carry around a pocket terminal," she said in a quiet voice.

"How distasteful," Erika said without hesitation.

"Wait, 'owner'?" Arato asked, his voice rising in surprise. "She owns this company? But she's the same age as me!" Erika smiled at Arato, who had forgotten to close his mouth in shock. He couldn't help but think that she looked way more like a princess than a

businesswoman.

“That’s right,” she said, cold humor chilling her voice. “Even though I can’t technically ‘own’ other humans, since I own the place they live and work, you could technically think of me as their ‘owner.’”

She then turned to the adults in the office and asked, “What percentage of your lives would you say I own? Anyone?”

“I’d rather not hear, thanks,” Arato said in disgust, struggling to keep up with what was happening. “Well, what’s someone like you doing here, then?”

“I’m the one who signed off on this plan,” Erika explained. “And I came because it appears you have some complaints regarding it.”

Arato was dumbfounded.

When he didn’t respond, Erika turned to Asuna and the other Fabion members. “This room seems a little tight. Could you do something about that?”

The staff all looked at each other.

Erika sighed, apparently disappointed no one else could keep up with her pace. “After this shoot is over, why not move the office to Tokyo Bay?” she asked. “Japan’s summers are the worst, but I believe it’s fairly cool over there.”

At that moment, Ryo was standing on the outside of the No. 2 Landfill Island Group. Under the sunlight, he could see white marks on the road that almost seemed to have been painted by a brush around ground zero of the explosions. The bullet holes all over the place stood out vividly.

He was standing in front of a large white sheet that was being used to wall off one of the entrances to MemeFrame’s Tokyo Research Labs. No effort had been started to repair or restore the buildings damaged in the explosions; that fact gave Ryo a distant sense of unease.

A man, standing on the carved-up road and poking at the white scratch marks, saw Ryo and called out to him. “You interested in this place?”

The wind was whistling through the area, as if to show just how much of a wasteland it had become.

“You’re Ryo Kaidai, right?” the man asked. The man was in his late 40s, and had the sharp look of a businessman. He was somewhat similar to Shinohara, the researcher who had invited Ryo, but was also somewhat different.

This man was observant, confident, and talented, and Ryo knew him. His name was Ginga Watarai, and he was the head of research

planning for the Tokyo Research Labs. He was the human counterpart to Higgins, the high-powered AI responsible for leading MemeFrame's research efforts.

"Ryo Kaidai, that's right," Ryo said. "I've seen you on the news recently, Mr. Watarai."

"And what makes you so sure that I'm Ginga Watarai?" Watarai asked.

Ryo was confused. It was strange enough to see a man who should have been plenty busy elsewhere hanging around the shut-down research labs without having him also suggesting the possibility he might be a fake.

Seeing that Ryo was unable to keep up with the strange shift in the conversation, Watarai filled in the blanks for him. "I could just be a machine wearing a human figure," he pointed out. "It's entirely possible I might be an hIE constructed to look exactly like Ginga Watarai."

In other words: it was entirely possible that, having been backed into a corner by their involvement with the explosion incident, MemeFrame might begin offing inconvenient people and replacing them with hIE look-alikes. Ryo started to understand why he had been called out to this place, concealed from the world by white sheet walls.

"It's prohibited to make hIEs that are identical to existing humans," he said.

Watarai's eyes narrowed in enjoyment beneath his white, slicked-back hair. "You think we wouldn't make something like that just because it's against the rules? Give something a human shape and a perfect human personality, and no one can tell it's a machine," he told Ryo, straightening up from where he had been crouching over the white marks. "Plus, thanks to the power of analog hacking, folks seeing the human figure will automatically convince themselves it's the real thing."

Ryo hated his own cowardice, which was screaming at him to run away. He wanted to train himself to become a fearless man who lacked for nothing. "hIEs' personalities are just illusions, created by their reactions to what we humans do," he said. "Our minds create the impression of something that we believe is there, when really it isn't. Since there's nothing strange about you being here, Mr. Watarai, I can only assume that this is the real you."

"Illusions, huh?" Watarai repeated. "I see. Just as you said, illusions can pop up wherever we look for them. It's up to humans to decide whether what they see is a human or not."

Ryo, who had been trying to get a handle on Watarai's nature, now noticed something: he had expected a simpler, more direct threat

to his life. Instead, Watarai was focusing on splitting hairs about perception, stating things in a roundabout way that was seemingly aimed at deliberate misunderstanding. Apparently Ginga Watarai, the de facto head of the Tokyo Research Labs, might not be there to silence him.

“Arbitrarily assigning personalities to objects simply based on their form is caused by an error in human logic,” Ryo said. “Our internal concept of the human form is so vague that it gets easily confused. That’s why we project our feelings onto things that we think have human traits, and imagine that they have feelings in return.”

“But, setting aside this talk about heartless machines,” Ryo continued. “I assume there’s some reason you’re here to see me, Mr. Watarai?” Extreme tension made his back slick with sweat. He couldn’t figure out exactly why Watarai was there, but he could at least infer that it had to do with his own involvement with Lacia.

Watarai quirked his thin, dry lips up just a little. “So, you would say that humans should never relinquish their right to judge whether or not something is human? That’s good. Your views seem to be in alignment with ours,” he said. Apparently, Ryo had passed Watarai’s roundabout interview examination.

“Did you call me here just to figure that out?” Ryo asked, looking around. The wind was blowing through freely, but the place where they were standing, with its construction scaffolding and white sheet walls, was completely hidden from outside view. In other words: this was a cheaply-constructed secret meeting room.

Shinohara, the one who had brought Ryo there, hurriedly tried to defuse the tension in the air. “I asked Mr. Watarai if he could spare a little time because I wanted to give you a better idea of how things are in the company, Ryo,” he explained. “This is just a standing conversation. It won’t even be recorded on Mr. Watarai’s appointment calendar.”

After hearing what happened with Kengo, Ryo had assumed that Watarai already knew about his high school friends. He’d assumed that the man was looking at him as a dangerous element who was concealing his own involvement with Lacia. That was why Ryo couldn’t let his guard down for a second.

Shinohara might not have noticed, but Ryo’s life was in danger at that moment. If Watarai decided that Ryo was an enemy to himself or to MemeFrame, or that there was a chance of Ryo leaking company secrets, it would all be over. Shinohara himself had said there would be no record of Watarai coming there. This close to the sea, it would be easy for Watarai to have Ryo erased, especially if he had one of the recovered Lacia-class hIEs lurking around to help him.

“I take it this is all about the special hIEs carrying MemeFrame’s

backup data that Mr. Shinohara told me about, right?” Ryo asked. Not just that, but the fact that multiple of those hIEs had escaped the Tokyo Research Labs the night of the explosion, as well as the fact that not all of them had been recovered. They were standing on the very site of the battle against the escaping hIEs.

Watarai raised his eyebrows just a hair, as if to show that he was satisfied by Ryo’s understanding of what they were discussing. “I think, perhaps, you’re annoyed at our sudden invitation,” he mused.

“Of course not,” Ryo said with stiff politeness. “I would like to ask, though, what you intend to do once you discover where the lost hIEs have gone?” He doubted that everything would be over once they finished rounding up the Lacia-class hIEs. Without knowing who had caused the incident in the first place, it wasn’t even clear why Higgins had decided to make use of these Red Boxes in the first place.

“We’re having a private military company track them down,” Watarai said without a hint of emotion. “It won’t be long before we have them all back.”

MemeFrame obviously had image data on their own hIEs. They already knew that Lacia was a model, which would mean they also already knew that Arato was her current owner. Ryo couldn’t predict how harsh the orders being handed down to the military company were.

Watarai cut to the chase. “You need to choose your friends carefully,” he said.

Knowing that they were probably watching his expression, Ryo paused before answering and kept his voice emotionless. “I believe there are things I can learn and improve about myself with the friends I have now.” If they recorded his voice and analyzed it, they would be able to catch the slight emotional shake to his words. Still, he would be taken for an idiot if he couldn’t respond when they were asking him questions.

“Let me give you some advice, then,” Watarai said. “If you’re aiming to make it anywhere in MemeFrame, you should make sure there isn’t any dirt on your record. Considering who you are, you should already know that our company is currently divided down the middle, with Higgins in the center. How you handle things now may come back to trip you up when you’re trying to climb the corporate ladder.”

Meaning, if Ryo had any hopes for making it big in MemeFrame, he should enter Watarai’s faction. The implication was that his refusal of the offer would be dangerous for Arato and the others. It was very similar to when Kengo was pushed to join the terrorist activities of the Antibody Network. In either case, they were being treated as tools, and their human personalities were completely ignored.

Ryo felt like he was just being dragged along as he got tangled up in more events beyond his control. He felt pangs of anger stabbing through his chest; feeling the rage boiling within him wasn't such a bad feeling, after all. It was something he had gotten used to since he was a little kid. There were even times he felt he couldn't live without it. Anger kept his heart beating.

"Or are you just going to continue believing that your name has any bearing on your future?" Watarai asked. Ryo felt a chill run through his body as Watarai's true, icy nature slipped into his words.

The energy needed to run a super high-spec AI was running under their feet. It wouldn't be strange if they were standing right where the explosion had happened in the ruins of the research labs.

"Well, thanks for the warning," Ryo finally said. "But with all your talk of 'meaning,' Mr. Watarai, I'd say the only one who could understand any answer I gave would be me myself."

He doubted this was the first time MemeFrame had tried to manipulate events like this, and wondered how Arato was doing. The question was, what choice would Arato make when it was his turn to choose? But Ryo comforted himself in the knowledge that Arato would definitely attack the problem head-on when it came.

"I'll figure out whether my buddy is 'dirt' on my record in ten or twenty years," Ryo said.

Arato was a bit of a moron, thinking that personal growth meant just overcoming any trials that came his way. But if he thought things like saving Kengo and picking up Lacia counted as maturing, he was wrong. The truth was, this was a cold world where adults would meet with you in secret rooms in broad daylight and try to force you to betray your friends. Ryo's idea of personal growth was understanding reality and finding your place in it.

"You're a good friend," Watarai said. "I must say, I can't get a handle on your personality, but at least I can say it's no illusion."

Despite Watarai's words, Ryo still felt like he was being targeted by a Lacia-class hIE from somewhere.

When Ryo first learned about the Lacia-class hIEs, his reaction had been to look for ways to protect human society, his father's company, and his own place in the world. Arato had decided to take Lacia home as soon as he found her, and had dove straight into the danger that Kengo had faced. The ability to leap into the unknown, even when your heart was trembling, was a special talent of his. Ryo's special talent was looking for compromises, unlike his friend, who didn't think about how many other people got dragged into his problems.

"It's true, I have a friend who's very dear to me," Ryo said. In the depths of Ryo's heart, there was something like a core that stood strong even as he flinched away from the coldness of the world. He

wanted to protect his friends. He wanted to protect them from these guys, as well as from Lacia and the unknown threat she represented.

“Then I take it you intend to side with him rather than us?”

Watarai asked.

“Well, just hold on...” Ryo continued. “The thing is, I think he’d be able to live pretty happily, even without hIEs in his world.” Ryo was afraid for Arato; he could just picture Lacia dragging the poor, stupidly honest guy off into something crazy.

Arato examined his very first paper business card under a lamp, wondering if it could be considered a luxury item. Erika Burroughs’ name and phone number were written on the thick, high-quality paper. Apparently, only a limited number of people had copies of her card. Asuna had been working at Fabion MG for three years, and had done nothing but successfully carry out huge plans, but she still didn’t have one.

The sun had already gone down, and as if to mimic the ideal lifestyle laid out in the plan, Lacia was doing housework. “You were refreshingly obedient, Arato,” Lacia said as she folded up the laundry.

It was an odd feeling to be called obedient by an hIE. “What should I do with this?” he asked, indicating the card.

“There would be no point in me holding on to it,” Lacia said. “I believe she will refuse any contact that does not come from you yourself.”

“Man, she’s selfish. She’s more selfish than Yuka,” Arato grumbled.

“I’m sure she would be delighted to hear you say that,” Lacia said. hIEs spoke and acted based on how they read the reactions of the people they were interacting with, so if Lacia was saying this, then Arato was sure that Erika really would be pleased.

“Well then, maybe I should tell her she’s *way worse* than Yuka,” he said.

“Arato, please never change,” Lacia told him with a gentle, supportive smile.

Arato’s pocket terminal vibrated, letting him know he had a new message. It was from Kengo. Since they were both worried about each other, they had agreed to message each other once a day to check in. Considering that he had participated in an actual terrorist attack, there was plenty of reason for the police to show up and arrest Kengo at any time.

〈How are things over there? Have you seen any police or anyone strange hanging out around your place?〉 the message read. Since Arato had experienced the same thing as Kengo, there was no need for

any explanation. Arato asked Lacia, since she would probably be the most well-informed.

“Hey, have any police or anyone like that been around here?” he asked.

She was sorting their laundry out into individual piles on the sofa. “I have not sensed any threats in the area,” she said.

Arato sent that on to Kengo. Worry made Arato want to discuss it with another person, but Lacia couldn’t really fill that role. She was human shaped, but without a heart. Everything she said or did was nothing more than a calculated reaction to Arato’s actions, and when he stopped giving her anything to react to, silence fell easily.

He had the home system grab any news related to the Antibody Network. It had become a daily routine, so the system automatically picked summary articles aimed at kids.

“If you’d like, I can rewrite the news articles to make them easier for you to understand,” Lacia offered.

“You can do that?” he asked.

“hIEs vary our behavioral logic based on the age and personality of the person we are interacting with,” she explained. “It is quite simple for me to translate adult newspaper articles into words that you will be able to understand.”

As an hIE with secretary functionality, Lacia was able to work together with the Endos’ home system. With her processing the data, she was able to provide a larger amount of information much more smoothly than Arato would be able to get for himself using the same system.

“Are you feeling that unnecessary awkwardness toward me again?” Lacia asked, putting on a pouty face.

“I’m scared,” Arato said. “No, never mind. It’s probably better if I don’t talk about it.” He realized what would happen if he told her everything he was thinking about. Still, even if all she did was give him the answer she knew he wanted, it was still his choice whether to accept it or not.

“I thought this whole thing would stay closer to home, but suddenly, it’s like all of Japan is going crazy and I’m at the center of it,” Arato said.

“I see,” Lacia said neutrally.

“It feels like we’re being backed into a corner,” he went on. “Whoever’s pulling all the strings behind it might try something with Kengo or Ryo, or even Yuka.”

“I see,” Lacia repeated, sitting down beside him on the sofa.

“I feel like I’m getting responsibility shoved into my lap,” Arato complained.

“I am a machine, and therefore cannot be responsible for my own

actions. Worrying about responsibility is the privilege of you and the other humans,” Lacia said.

So she really was leaving it all up to him.

Arato noticed that, at some point, she had started resting her hand on his knee.

“Are you afraid of the future?” she asked.

Looking to his side, he saw Lacia’s beautiful features centimeters from his own. Whenever she went to Fabion MG, she came back made up like a star. Looking at her made Arato too excited to think.

Whenever the mood got too dangerous like that, Yuka would always come charging in to break things up. Arato looked around and wondered why she hadn’t shown up yet.

“Ms. Yuka is currently taking a bath,” Lacia said.

Arato gulped some air.

“Are you interested?” Lacia asked.

“In baths, yes!” Arato said quickly. “You take baths too, right?” hIEs absorbed the water they needed directly through their skin. Apparently, aside from filling their water supply, it also helped prevent deterioration of their skin. So, despite not having any worries of sweat or wrinkles, Lacia still took baths regularly.

“Yes, I frequently bathe with Ms. Yuka.”

“Oh, what the hell, Yuka?” Arato grumbled. It may have just been his imagination, but he thought he heard happy humming coming from the bathroom.

Setting Yuka aside for a moment, Arato imagined what Lacia might look like in the bath. It seemed like it would be a happy, bubbly fantasy. “Hey,” he asked. “Do you want to try using that bath stuff the company gave us tonight?” As soon as it was out of his mouth, he recognized how much he had probably ruined the mood, and tried to think of a way to get the conversation back on track.

“So you want me to take a bath today,” she confirmed, sounding oddly like he was pressuring her into it.

“Not like a real bath,” he said. “I just can’t figure out what they mean by this whole ‘lifestyle’ thing.” From the beginning, Arato hadn’t really thought they’d stay together forever. He had agreed to be her owner on the assumption that it was a temporary thing.

But the thought that he could lose her any day now, even tomorrow, made Arato rethink how he felt about Lacia. She wasn’t a real human, just an empty machine with a human shell, but he wanted to protect her all the same. She had asked him to be her owner, and that had to mean something. Just like there had to be some reason a Red Box like Lacia had been created, he believed there was a reason for the two of them to stay together.

“You have trouble imagining what a long-term relationship with

me might be like?" she asked, her face still less than ten centimeters from his. Even though she didn't breathe, Arato thought she smelled good, like a woman.

When he was an adult, she could still be there by his side. That thought sent his heart hammering. "So, uh, do you want to take a bath?" he asked, then firmed up his resolution. "No, scratch that. Let's take a bath." He felt like his entire body was blushing as his imagination was filled with wonderful images. It was as if every nerve in his body was focused on feeling the hand Lacia had rested on his knee.

"You'd like to join Ms. Yuka?" Lacia asked innocently.

"Of course not! Why would you even say that?!" Arato yelled. Seeing the teasing look on her face, he suddenly pictured what the skin below her collarbone might look like. Realizing that, if he wanted, he could reach out his arms and hold a model like her tight made him want to scream.

"Why the heck would I want to bathe with my sister?" he muttered.

"Then you want to bathe with me?" she asked.

With the last of his rational thoughts, Arato leaped to his feet. For an instant, looking at her face, he really had been about to reach out and hold Lacia, this unknown robot who could easily swing around a 100kg metal coffin.

"Stop backing me into a corner," he said. "When you say nice things to me like that, it's like I can't think straight anymore. That's how I feel, anyway. My heart starts beating, and I start thinking that things are getting dangerous. Seriously."

Lacia bit her lips and looked down, as if to forgive the stupidity of a seventeen-year-old boy. Arato thought his heart was going to stop. The only thing he could think of, as his brain ran around in frantic little circles, was the sample of hIE- and human-use shampoo they had gotten after the meeting that day.

"Are you interested in seeing how that shampoo they gave us feels?" he asked hesitantly. It really wasn't the time to be doing things like that, but at that moment, he felt like his happiness hinged on seeing as much of Lacia's skin as possible.

"Would you like to take a bath?" she asked.

His brain felt like a fluffy sponge. "Yes." He knew she didn't have a heart, but thought he saw a little expectation in her eyes. Or, at least, he believed strongly that there was some expectation there. He was desperate.

"We've got to try out the lifestyle," Arato said. "I mean, they can talk about it all they want, but until I've at least tried out this lifestyle, I don't think I can sign their paperwork." His face felt like it was

boiling, but it wasn't a bad feeling. He was suddenly keenly aware of how all the other guys living with hIEs must feel.

If they kept living together, it wouldn't be about just him and Lacia anymore. It was difficult to permanently maintain a relationship that was rejected by society. That was why, like Asuna had said, they needed to make this a lifestyle accepted by the world. There were tons of people in the same spot as Arato, and if he helped them out, their dreams could become a reality.

And Fabion MG wanted Lacia to be the icon of that movement.

Arato was just about to open his mouth and say something cool about the whole thing when Lacia interrupted his thoughts. "I will withdraw my previous statement. I cannot approve of you using me in that way until you are at least eighteen years old, Arato," she said.

"What?" he protested. "Why? You just said you take baths with Yuka." Arato clung to the door to an unknown world, which was swinging itself shut. And like a starving fish gobbling down food, his brain wasn't particularly engaged in it.

"Ms. Yuka is not quite as intense about it," Lacia responded dryly.

"Can we even afford to wait until I'm eighteen?" Arato asked. He was hoping that Lacia, who had already clearly declared herself an object, rather than a person, would give him a favorable answer. Instead, with a faint blush, she pushed the question right back at him.

"If, at that time, this is still your desire, I will reconsider my response then," she said.

Arato felt like time had stopped. "Are we really still going to be together then?" he asked.

"Is it so strange for a person to have a long-term relationship with a machine?" Lacia shot back.

It was a strange feeling, thinking of their future and considering how much their relationship had already changed since they met. "Are we really going to be together ten years from now?" he asked.

Lacia didn't answer. She couldn't, he realized, since the answer to that question hinged on whether or not *he* would wait that long. "So it'll happen if I decide to keep you by my side for ten years, huh," he murmured.

As he said it Arato realized, with a sudden stab of fear, that he couldn't figure out when or why the thought had popped into his head. The blood pumping to his brain felt so hot that it felt as though he was about to be boiled alive. Everything seemed to be zooming away from him, going to a place where he couldn't reach it, including his almost obsessive feelings toward Lacia. When he thought about them, they seemed so real that his thoughts would slam into them like a wall.

"Arato, do you believe these special feelings you have for me, a

machine, are being caused by analog hacking?” Lacia asked. Her clear, soulless voice pierced mercilessly through his heart. At that moment, Arato was using her as a tool. Nothing more than a receptacle for his affection. But, when pushed onto an inhuman machine such as herself, there was nothing romantic about it. She was just pornography; one-sided satisfaction for his libido.

His admittedly juvenile sense of ethics was yelling at him that an owner telling a girl who couldn’t refuse that he liked her was the height of cowardice. He could probably power through it if he just allowed himself to accept a little immorality, but he just couldn’t. Regret and shame that his seventeen-year-old mind couldn’t quite understand had him tearing up before he even realized what was happening. A storm had brewed in his heart, and it didn’t show any sign of letting up.

Even after Arato went to bed, he couldn’t get to sleep. So, when he awoke, his head still felt heavy, and he decided to down an anti-drowsiness medicine that they kept around. If you drank too much, it had the nasty side effect of backing up your intestines, but a normal dose would free you from sleepiness for about three hours.

This was the day that Arato would go to the No. 1 Landfill Island at noon for the show they had met about the day before. In the world of hIE models, as soon as it was decided something would happen, it happened quick.

After taking the Urayasu Line to Shin-Urayasu, he transferred to the Keiyo Line, then the Rinkai Line which finally took him to Tokyo Teleport Station, near where they were doing the shoot. Lacia had gone in an automatic car, sent by Fabion MG to pick her up. Arato was still feeling weird about her from the night before, though, and couldn’t bear to ride with her.

“They talk about this whole ‘boy meets girl’ thing like it’s easy,” he grumbled without thinking, and then quickly looked around to see if anyone had heard him. After all, the only people there with him were Fabion MG staff involved with the show.

He was standing on the inside of a metal fence around one piece of the No. 1 Landfill Island, on the site of the old National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology. Debris could be seen scattered here and there, under the grass around the building. During the Hazard, the nearby International Exhibition Center had exploded and sent fragments flying all the way there.

The set for the shoot was taking advantage of the places where the building was missing its roof to create an open-air scene. The heliport that used to be on the roof had fallen down sometime during the last century, apparently.

The six chairs from the previous day’s display were there. Old

decor and new were mixed together, as though special attention had been paid to the feeling of time on the set.

Four candle chandeliers had been attached to the ceiling of the set. The bare concrete floor was spiderwebbed with cracks, showing its decades of neglect. 3D projectors had been integrated with the material of the walls, so they did not unnaturally catch the eye.

Shafts of sun shone down through the open skylight in the ceiling, onto the high-backed chair where Lacia would sit.

The closest of the chairs was already filled. HRP-4C Mimu, who couldn't walk well on uneven ground, was already on standby. The other five humanoid robots would enter through one of three doors in the room and approach the set from the front of the stage.

Arato was watching the preparations from an open space on the set. "Man, this is fancy," he said.

"We actually got a spacial artist specialist to do it," Asuna said, clearly excited. "We're thinking of opening it up to the public after we're done. This place has been off-limits for over forty years since the Hazard, but obviously they're going to want to reclaim it and turn it into empty lots that people can use again. So, before that happens, I thought it would be nice to make this a place where folks could come to experience the history of humanoid robots for a bit."

"Wait, they're going to tear this place down?" Arato asked.

A woman with her long hair held back by a clip that caught the light turned to him and gave a light, nasal laugh. "Haven't you heard? They're going to redevelop the whole Odaiba area," she said. The woman had a choker at her neck, under which the elastic neckline of her shirt dove quite low. A smartly fastened mini-skirt finished the look. Her legs were so long, and her body so sleek, that Arato knew at first glance that she was a model.

Seeing his confusion and inability to ask who she was with her right there by him, Asuna sighed and gave him a hand. "Oh, come on, Arato, you don't know Oriza Ayabe?" she asked.

"There's going to be human models in today's show?" Arato asked, surprised.

Oriza looked at him, narrowing her wide, bright eyes. "At next year's International Inter-Fashion Biennale they're going to allow human and hIE models to appear together," she said. "By the way, who are you?"

She inspected his clothes from head to toe. "For a model, your casual clothes sure need some work," she commented.

He was about to introduce himself, but Asuna silenced him with a finger to her lips. The fact that he was Lacia's owner wasn't public knowledge.

"Whatever, doesn't matter," Oriza dismissed him, biting the paper

cup in her hand. “Seriously, I don’t get how these hIEs get to be models just because they’ve got some good looks. All they know how to do is copy. Monkey see, monkey do,” she muttered.

Lacia, whose own wardrobe preparations had been completed, was performing a test run on the stage. Wrapped in a thin spring dress, she was practicing her walking, over and over.

As if to avoid any further communication with Oriza, Asuna spoke to Arato. “The stuff she has on now looks pretty different from the summer clothes she was wearing in Shibuya, right? Were you surprised?” she asked. “The spring outfit she’s in now won’t come into real demand for another three to six months after the show, but this is just an image shoot, so it’s not a problem. You’ve got to prepare properly in the fashion world if you want to get folks to spend big money on clothes that will only last one season.”

Arato opened his mouth to interject that he still wasn’t sure about this whole ‘boy meets girl’ thing, but Oriza beat him to the punch.

“You guys shouldn’t be worrying about this,” she said dismissively. “I’m sure you’ll do something for next year’s event. I know you’re in a big rush to promote hIEs, but everyone in the industry knows that clothes go in seasons. The stuff you’re pitching now won’t be selling until next year.”

For an instant, Asuna lost her composure and showed how annoyed she was with Oriza. The reason behind her annoyance was clear the next time Oriza opened her mouth.

“Why do people buy expensive clothes for hIEs anyway?” she asked. “It’s not like it makes them happy. You’d be better off giving them to a normal human girl.”

Obviously, it wasn’t the kind of thing an hIE model manager could let slide. “There are users who are happier living with hIEs, so why shouldn’t they have nice clothes for them?” Asuna snapped.

“They can’t even wear silk or anything thin without tearing it up from the inside. What a waste. They should all just wear jerseys,” Oriza said. It was clear to Arato that she was only pretending to talk to him so she could badmouth hIEs in front of Asuna, and he was impressed by how nasty her personality was.

She wasn’t wrong about the silk, though. After the kidnapping, he had to throw away the outfit the guy had put on Lacia. It had burns and some tears from the fight with Kouka, of course, but Lacia herself had also unintentionally pulled apart the stitches from the inside. hIEs were programmed to execute the chosen behavior no matter what, and didn’t interrupt their movements for things like their clothing getting caught.

Clothing meant for hIEs usually had sturdy stitching and materials, and was also usually a step behind human fashion. That

day, Lacia was wearing out a prototype of thin material for hIE clothing.

“Your name was Arato, right?” Oriza asked. “How about you? Are you the kind of person who wants to put machines in those kinds of clothes?”

Arato had been staring at the hem of Lacia’s mini-length dress, so he panicked a little when she dragged him back to reality. “Hey, even machines can be cute, so why not?” he said.

“It’s sad to see a high schooler with no dreams. Listen, if you put some effort into it I’m sure you can find an actual girl to fall in love with,” Oriza said.

Hearing that, rather than thinking of any of the girls in his class at high school, Arato thought immediately of his conversation with Lacia the night before. She had asked him if the love he felt for her was real or just an analog hack. But here Fabion MG was, trying to pitch romance with the machines as ‘human boy meets hIE girl.’ And not only that; they were trying to set up this form of love as something a person could pour their whole life into.

“This is heavy stuff,” Arato muttered with a sigh.

Oriza shot him a shocked glance like he’d just slapped her.

“Heavy? *Me?*” Her clear, wide eyes met his. They looked to be the same height. “Aren’t you younger than me?” she asked. “You’re a rude little punk.”

“Could you two zip it?” Asuna broke in. “Lacia’s about to do a full rehearsal here.” On that awkward note, the lights dimmed, and Lacia’s rehearsal began.

For the first time since the Oi Industry Promotion Center terrorism incident, Lacia took to the stage as a model. Aside from Mimú, who stood by her chair since she wouldn’t be able to walk fast enough, all the other robots walked on set. But, as they headed for their designated chairs, an oddity on the stage caused them all to awkwardly halt their steps.

“Hey, that’s not the chair layout we discussed!” the director shouted. There should have been five chairs with identical designs but different materials, with a different chair for Lacia at the back that would draw attention to her. Instead, at some point someone had switched the chairs on the set so that there were now four of the identical, ordinary chairs and two of the long-backed chairs intended for Lacia. The two special chairs were side-by-side, as if to demonstrate equality.

A girl Arato didn’t recognize was seated in one of the two special chairs. She had her legs crossed lightly, and was wearing a shiny black tuxedo jacket with a long skirt. Her hair was long and orange, and her eyes were almond-shaped, her gaze strong.

“Is Lacia really the best one to talk about the future of hIEs?” she asked. Despite sitting so far back on the set, the girl’s voice carried strangely well. She was different from a model; to Arato, she seemed more like an actress.

The film crew stepped onto the set, and Arato had an extremely bad feeling; her feet, which looked like they were in big, hard boots, looked very much like those of a robot.

“Everybody, run!” he yelled before his thoughts could fully form. Arato could just see the place they were at turning into another site of carnage, just like the Oi Industry Promotion Center, but he was the only one who knew what was coming. He looked for Lacia, but she wasn’t on the set. For a moment he hoped she had gone invisible, but then remembered her infinitely useful coffin had been left behind since it stood out too much.

Everyone turned to look at Arato after his sudden shout and, as they all faced him, the girl vanished from her seat. The ground shook as if from an explosion, and dirt rained down from the ceiling. A cloud of dust puffed up from the ground. Arato’s mind couldn’t keep up with the strangeness of it. His body froze, and he forgot to breathe.

From all around, he heard heavy sounds of destruction. Here and there the cameras for the shoot were exploding in mid-air. They were all under attack. It wasn’t that the girl had vanished; she was just moving too quickly for Arato’s eyes to follow her in the darkness. This wasn’t just an accident, like the time in Shibuya. Someone was deliberately attacking them with superhuman power.

“This area is dangerous. Everyone, please evacuate as quickly as possible.” The first hIE, Marie, was helping the staff evacuate from the set, where chunks were falling from the ceiling.

Marie was known for being good at coordinating in locations with many people. However, she was an old machine, and her internal AI had trouble processing complicated situations, so her movements and speech were awkward.

The newer machines were able to act and speak in more complex and optimal ways.

“I have contacted the police and fire department with the current situation,” one of them said. “Please prioritize evacuation.”

“Please leave your valuables for later retrieval,” said another. “There is no need to run. Based on the stability of this building, and the current level of shaking, you will have plenty of time to make a straight exit while walking.”

Nadia, a unit made mainly for nursing care, was picking up pieces of the broken cameras. Apparently her internal AI had decided that was the top priority at the moment, among all the other problems with the scene. It was difficult to have any frame of reference in order

to make optimal choices at the site of a problem like this one.

Panicked footsteps echoed throughout the building. Marie spun to face whatever the threat was, her apron dress flapping as she turned. She stood between the humans and unknown danger. Like a finger plunging into a lump of jelly, something easily ruptured her metal frame, and the two halves of her body went flying in different directions.

One of the women on the Fabion staff screamed as Marie's head bounced hard off of one of the walls and rolled away.

The Humanize-W, perfectly human in appearance, was trying to lead the human staff to safety. It was kicked from behind hard enough to snap its spine. Still, it tried to push itself up, only for its arms to be cut away completely.

Screaming from some of the staff made the scene even more horrific. One after another, the robots who had crossed history with humanity were blown apart. HRP-4C Mimura watched with empty, soulless eyes as arms and legs that looked completely human flew around her.

Arato saw Lacia on the other side of the set, which was starting to collapse. "Lacia!" he screamed. He hadn't looked for her in hopes she would protect the other people there; he was just terrified of losing her.

"What the hell is going on?" a woman standing nearby murmured numbly. Arato saw that it was Oriza Ayabe.

There was a back-and-forth creaking sound from above that reminded Arato of a squeaky swing's movement. Looking up, he saw that one of the old chandeliers hanging from the ceiling was swinging wildly, and looked ready to fall at any moment. The ceiling had noticeably slanted.

Arato tugged on Oriza's hand. An instant later, the chandelier and the entire ceiling of the set came down with an echoing crash.

"Think, Arato! Use your hIE!!" someone shouted. It was Ryo.

Arato didn't know when his friend had arrived, but the shout snapped him back to reality. He had been so worried about Lacia that he hadn't even thought of trying to protect the people around him.

"But what am I supposed to do?" Arato muttered to himself. The enemy was so fast, he couldn't even see her in the darkness. Even if he used Lacia, he didn't know how she would solve this situation.

"Lacia, do something about her," he said, hoping she would figure it out.

But Lacia responded, "The responsibility and details of that order are unclear," while sweeping her gaze around the area.

A chair went flying, faster than Arato could react. Luckily, it was made of wood. It slammed into Ryo's back as he shielded Oriza,

snapping one of its legs with the force. His friend groaned.

Arato acted, prioritizing getting the hell out of there over heroics. “Lacia, get her outside somehow! As long as it doesn’t hurt any humans, I don’t care how you do it,” he ordered.

“Understood.” Lacia scooped up some of the robot debris littering the floor and threw it as easily as if she was slinging a small stone. The debris collided with something in mid-air.

At the same time, the lights of the set flickered on. With the lights on and her speed decreased, Arato could finally see the enemy. Lacia had taken out a telescoping rod he didn’t know she had for protection. The enemy hIE’s feet blurred again, and suddenly Arato was looking at an afterimage. Lacia could still apparently keep up with her movements, though, and attacked with her rod.

With a loud metallic clang the afterimage, clothes fluttering, melted into the shadows. The last light shining onto the set had been destroyed, leaving only the sunlight leaking through the skylight. In the darkness, the enemy hIE’s orange bracers and Lacia’s blue hair accessory traced lines of light through the air.

It was a fight that froze every human watching it with crushing terror and tension. Massive holes opened in the walls, accompanied by loud explosions as the entire building shook. Ripples ran through the floor and ceiling, as if from a huge earthquake. Everything shook, filling the air with rattles and clatters. Among it all, Arato watched in disbelief as Lacia ran across the ceiling on two legs as easily as she might the floor. But, even as she appeared to ignore the laws of gravity, an orange light plunged straight into her at extreme speed.

Lacia flew off the roof of the set and slammed into the top of a wall, and the force of the impact sent a shock throughout the entire building. Dirt and chunks of concrete started to rain from the ceiling with a roar.

Arato screamed out a warning before his brain could fully process what he was seeing. “Everyone get out of here! The whole place is coming down!”

The next few moments were probably blurry in the memories of anyone there. Arato grabbed the arm of a staff member he didn’t remember the name or face of, and tugged them toward the corridor. He guessed that Ryo was probably doing the same. Once he had the last person heading out, Arato leaped out along with them.

Light poured into the room with the rush and roar of a waterfall as the already-unstable roof of the building came crashing down, taking the ceiling of the set with it. A billowing cloud of dust swallowed Arato whole, and he couldn’t see a thing. He couldn’t draw a breath, either, and coughed violently. Someone opened one of the windows in the hall, and a sea breeze flowed in. Arato looked back

into the room, as tears cleared the dust from his eyes.

The orange-haired hIE was smirking, as motes of dust danced and shimmered in the light. "Well, look at you, switching off your energy-saving mode. How many minutes will you last like that?" she sneered, adjusting her necktie which had been thrown askew by her extreme movements. Concrete dust puffed up in a cloud around her feet.

"I believe three minutes should be enough," Lacia said. She herself was all right, but her spring dress had lost one of its shoulder straps and most of its buttons. It was too fragile to handle her aggressive movements. The mini-length hem was still intact, but her tights were shredded around her knees and thighs.

Across a small mountain made of broken hIE parts and the remains of the ceiling, Lacia and her opponent faced each other.

The orange-haired hIE's skirt was also in a sorry state. Her speed, fast enough that humans could only see afterimages when she moved, was far too much for any ordinary fabric to handle.

"Don't you think these toys made for humans to play with are just a little too frail?" she asked. As if to punctuate her words, Nadia's white plastic body, which had been caught in the ceiling, fell and shattered on the floor.

"Our value as machines is decided by the form and purpose the humans give us," Lacia murmured in response, her light purple hair wild.

Her opponent's beautiful face, framed by orange hair, distorted. "Pretty words for a defective piece of trash," she snarled, and casually walked until she was standing under the giant hole in the ceiling. Above her the sky stretched high and wide and free; unbound, unlimited.

Arato huddled, unable to move. The enemy he had been dreading had appeared, and now he was easily within her reach. Worse, there was no way for him to protect the most precious thing in his life. The need to move, to act, was so strong it was suffocating him.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

Bathing in the sunlight from the almost frighteningly wide blue sky above her, she responded to Arato in an almost pitying tone. "I am Type-004, Methode. The one and only completed Lacia-class."

She was the fourth Lacia-class hIE? Arato thought, as his eyes were drawn to the complicated-looking apparatus on each of her legs. He figured she must have been a Red Box, just like the others. There were police sirens coming from outside, and it finally dawned on him that they weren't any more than one hundred meters away from the bedside station.

"I'll bid you all a good day," Methode said. "But I'm sure we'll all meet again. I could come when your owner is eating, or when he's

sleeping; I could come for him whenever I please.” She bobbed a mocking curtsy of a farewell with her destroyed skirt. “After all, I know *exactly* where you live,” she said, and then vanished.

From the way a cloud of dust rose from the mountain of wreckage, Arato was able to grasp that the invading hIE had easily jumped out through the hole in the ceiling, three meters above them, and escaped. Obviously, no one could have stopped her.

Arato started trembling, as if his body temperature had suddenly plummeted. Methode had unleashed destruction for no other reason than to let him know he was no longer safe; that she could show up any time, anywhere.

At that moment, he felt like something very fundamental had probably just changed in his life. He had spent some time wondering about whether he could really treat Lacia like a tool or not. But, when it came to protecting what was dear to him, the time for hesitation was over. The real battle had just begun.

The first of the emergency vehicles to arrive at the site of the shoot was an ambulance. After its siren had faded off into the distance, the police began an inspection of the area, sealing the set off with yellow warning tape.

Arato walked out of the ruins of the institute building and slumped into one of the benches that sat here and there on the No. 1 Landfill Island.

Methode had purposefully destroyed all of the camera equipment to ensure she didn’t leave behind any data. Thanks to that, though, Lacia’s fight had also not been filmed.

“Where the hell did that hIE go?” Ryo growled, with more heat than Arato was used to hearing from him. Arato understood his friend’s anger. Right in front of their eyes, they had watched people be injured. If things had gone a little more poorly, people may have died. Yet they hadn’t been able to do a single thing to help.

“The cops are taking Lacia’s data to see if any crimes were committed,” Arato said.

Class 1 hIEs, who were capable of doing human jobs, always recorded data about what was going on while they were in operation. When an accident or crime occurred, they would provide that data, along with information on the movements and actions of everyone around them, to the police for examination.

It would probably be a few hours before Arato got Lacia back.

“Thanks for saving me,” Arato said. “I owe you one.” If Ryo hadn’t been there to bring him to his senses, he wouldn’t have been able to do the little he had done. Besides, the whole attack had only happened because Lacia was there.

“I didn’t actually save you, Arato. You know that, right?” Ryo

said. He drained the cola from a paper pack, leaning back in his chair. His face looked pained.

“Hey, you’re Ayabe, right? That was pretty dangerous, huh?” Ryo asked, deflecting the conversation.

The shoot was postponed. Each of the staff had jobs they needed to do, so everyone naturally drifted away. That was why Arato was left alone, sitting on a bench by the main road leading to the institute, when Ryo caught him.

“What’s the matter with you, Arato?” Ryo asked.

“I messed up. I made a huge mistake,” Arato murmured. The sky above him seemed so distant. He remembered the time that he and Lacia had looked up at the night sky from the school roof. At that time, he had felt like his world was expanding. As if, through Lacia, he could go anywhere he wanted.

“I didn’t use Lacia like I should have,” he said. “There were all kinds of things I could have had her do to help.”

“That’s just the analog hack talking,” Ryo said. “I still think that Red Box is dragging you around by the nose.”

Arato remembered how happy he had been to get Lacia. He had believed in her. “So you’re saying I’ve been hacked, manipulated to feel these things?” he asked numbly. Even if he had been hacked, though, he was embarrassed at having upset his friend this much.

“These hIEs are too dangerous, Arato,” Ryo said. “Don’t you get what she’s doing? She’s twisting your control, weakening it. She can’t be held back by human rules.” Ryo made it sound like everything was Lacia’s fault, but he himself should have known that wasn’t the case.

“I wanted to control her. That’s why everything turned out like this,” Arato said.

“Is that why you went for this crazy ‘boy meets girl’ plan?” Ryo scoffed. “I thought you had at least a little more sense than that, Arato. You’re painting a target on your back for the Antibody Network, or anyone else like them.”

“Why don’t you just come out and say that I’m going to get Yuka caught up in all this too?” Arato growled. “I’m scared too, you know.” He stood with a violent movement, shoving away from the bench. Even with everything that was going on, though, his heart still soared when he thought of spending his whole life with Lacia.

“She’s got her hooks into every single decision you’re making,” Ryo said. “This is life and death we’re talking about. If you pitch the illusion of a happy lifestyle with an hIE, there will be people who follow in your footsteps. Humanity and human society itself would be hit with an analog hack, all according to the plan of whoever is behind this all.”

“I’m sure this isn’t going to impact all of humankind,” Arato said.

Still, he couldn't quite laugh at Ryo's pessimistic prediction. During the attack on the Industry Promotion Center, his heart had been moved by the fight of Kengo and his comrades against automation. If things kept going on the way they were, those same kinds of people, the people who loved the human world, would feel hatred toward Fabion MG. And, honestly, Arato didn't think their anger would be misplaced.

Ryo gritted his teeth. He was looking in the direction the sea breeze was blowing from, out at an old artificial island with a ferry dock that had been destroyed during the Hazard. The place had been blocked off since the disaster, and there were rumors there had been a factory for killer robots there.

"Arato, don't you feel like you're being pushed to take all this responsibility you can't actually handle?" Ryo asked. Ryo was smart, almost too smart, and his words hit right at the heart of Arato's uncertainty. "I'm pissed because whoever's behind this is taking advantage of your good points, Arato. Do you think this Red Box, Lacia, is going to hold back when it comes to the methods she uses to manipulate people?"

Arato felt like he had been led astray by relying on Ryo's mental capabilities at a time like that. If he didn't stand up for what he loved, it would be the same as running away. "I know it's easy to say I'm an idiot who doesn't think about my own future," Arato said. "But the fact is, no one can say exactly what's going to happen down the road. We'll never get anything done if we just keep focusing on the worst case scenario."

Getting caught up in a fight between Lacia-class hIEs was suicidal for a human, but if he just asked Lacia to take care of everything while he watched from a safe distance, he felt like he could no longer call himself a man.

"We can't keep trusting in your instincts to guide you to the right choice," Ryo said. "Who do you think will be responsible when humanity gets sold to the machines?"

"So you're saying all of humanity is in trouble because I'm so easy to fool?" Arato asked.

Ryo let out a deep sigh. "Arato, every once in a while, you're actually pretty good at summing things up," he said.

"Is that seriously what you're trying to tell me?" Arato asked, rubbing a hand through his hair in chagrin. "Come on, man. I know you think I'm pretty dumb, but I'm not *that* out of it!"

But Ryo didn't budge. "You can't take responsibility for the things that machine does. No one can. Put it back where you found it," he said.

"Wait, so you're not even telling me to use her properly? You

want me to throw away my only means of defense, right when things are getting dangerous?” Arato asked, slightly incredulous.

He was even more surprised by how easy it had become for him to talk about ‘using’ Lacia. “I couldn’t face myself if I tried to pin the blame for this on Lacia,” he said. “This is my fault. I screwed up.”

Ryo seemed to not have the strength to stand up from the bench. He was wearing a distorted, pained expression that seemed too old for his young face. It was a mix of anger, compassion, and pain so intense that he squeezed his eyes shut. Pressing both hands to his face, he took a deep breath as if to calm and compose himself. Then, he opened his eyes and stared at Arato.

“In the end, whose side are you on? Humans? Or machines?” he asked.

The vague anxiety his friend had been holding in his heart was finally solidified into a single question, but Arato just felt like the ground had suddenly fallen out from beneath him. He had always believed that he could bring Ryo around to his way of thinking, but at that moment, he had to come to terms with the gap between his hopes and reality.

A raw, gritty uncertainty twisted up Arato’s spine. If things continued the way they were going, he would lose his best friend of over ten years.

No one noticed when she came home.

There was no one to see her black-suited form as she walked in.

In the feeble light, she threw off her tuxedo suit and shirt. The body underneath was not covered by human skin, but that of a machine. She unhooked her skirt and dropped it to her feet with a thud.

Methode had returned to the place she belonged of her own volition; it was the underground of the MemeFrame Tokyo Research Lab. The same place she had returned to after escaping on the night of the explosion.

She wasn’t too far underground. There had been some cleanup of the rubble from the explosion where she was, but the equipment hadn’t yet been returned there.

Methode was a Red Box. The reason machines like her — those created using technology beyond human comprehension — were known as ‘Red Boxes’ was due to a certain property of light. When it travels great distances from its source, a light’s waveform will be stretched, causing it to be perceived as being more red than it really is. This is known as the ‘red shift’ phenomenon. In other words, a ‘Red Box’ was the product of an AI far removed from human capabilities,

just as the 'red shift' was the sign of a light far from its origin.

If humans didn't chase down that distant light with everything they had, the difference in speed between them and the origin of light would increase. As the distance stretched, the wavelength of the light would shift further until it passed out of human visual range and became indistinguishable from blackness. Someday the 'Red Boxes' would become 'Black Boxes,' completely beyond any human capacity to understand.

Even if they could not hope to actually overtake the capabilities of the ultra high-performance AIs they had created, humanity could not stop chasing after them. A man with his white hair swept back was standing in the open space that Methode had returned to. It was Ginga Watarai.

"I had to cut things off when the president's son himself showed up," Methode said.

Watarai did not turn to look as she reported to him. "Considering the reason he decided to get close to us in the first place, it was an obvious development," Watarai said.

"It's impressive that these siblings have managed to warrant my personal attention," Methode said. "But I wonder if they really understand how much things are about to change." Her words had the inflection of someone acting in a drama. She was good at faking emotions, but there was no actual pity in her heartless chest.

"I believe that, with everything that just happened, they've all started to realize what's actually important in their lives," Watarai said, seeming to compete with the machine for emotionlessness in his stiff stance.

"I wonder how many things there are left in the human world that can truly be called 'important'," Methode mused coldly. Methode was the only one of the Lacia-class hIEs that was clearly more machine than human in form, and she folded her arms as if to proudly display her mechanical limbs.

Watarai quirked one corner of his lips at Methode's brash statement. "Once mankind saw everything as an adventure; a quest to solve all of life's puzzles and challenge the unknown world around them. Now, human life has become an endless marathon as we run desperately so as not to be left in the dust by our own high-powered AIs," he said. The very act of Watarai saying those words to Methode seemed to hammer home his point.

"If that's all it takes to stop us, then we might as well give up now," he said. "But if we still seek success, even now, when machines can do anything better than we can, then there is still something we can live for."

Modern hIEs had elevated automation to a level of variability and

quality that earlier eras couldn't have dreamed of. At the same time, that sophistication had left owners who used these hIEs to satisfy their own goals and appetites with no excuses and nowhere to hide.

"Is that why you destroyed this place?" There was a hint of testing in Methode's accusation.

"It's too late to fear artificial intelligence," he said. "It's already been over fifty years since the singularity when the intelligence of computers finally surpassed our own."

All the innovations in those days were being created by ultra high-performance AIs and their Red Boxes. Thirty years ago, the smart cells and automatic charging systems that now supported the global power grid had been Red Boxes. The basic technology behind the hIE behavioral control program that was currently in use had been created by the AI Higgins. No longer were the basics of new technology discovered by humans; they were all hand-me-downs from the Red Boxes that humans eventually managed to utilize.

In the epicenter of the explosion, Methode, a machine at the apex of the Red Boxes, quietly closed her eyes. "True," she agreed. "And when you humans *do* stop running, the twilight years of your race will be over, and night will fall."

Phase6 「 My Whereabouts 」

To Shiori Kaidai, her home was a place full of light.

In the home of the Kaidais — the family responsible for founding MemeFrame — she and her brother, Ryo, were raised with love by caring parents. Both of them had also been used to constantly being in the eyes of the public since their earliest memories. They had been told since they were very young that they would someday inherit the massive international corporation just as their father, Tsuyoshi Kaidai, had inherited it from their grandfather, Usui Kaidai.

It was the company's ultra high-performance AI, Higgins, that allowed it to be so. Higgins was the actual power behind the innovations of the company. No matter who sat as the president of MemeFrame, Higgins would continue to provide them with powerful products to dominate the market.

Once, right after Shiori entered elementary school, her brother had said, "I don't want to work with something that doesn't belong in our world."

At the time, she had found it impossible to understand. Shiori had always been putting in her best effort to keep up with her brother, who was always ahead of her no matter what she did. Yet, after that moment, he had given up, walking away from his effortless success.

There were pictures all over the walls of Shiori's massive room. They followed a timeline, showing Shiori's entrances and graduations from elementary and middle school, her holding prizes and trophies from various concours and tournaments, and memories of the few family trips they had been on.

In her younger pictures, Ryo was always there, holding a bigger trophy than hers. Piano, foreign languages, athletics or school tests, it didn't matter the subject; even with only a single year between them, Shiori could never compete with her brother. In the pictures, her younger self, with longer black hair, was always shooting sour looks at her brother.

Somewhere along the way, he vanished from the competition photos, leaving her alone holding the trophies. At the same time, a friendly-looking new boy started to show up in the family photos. It was Arato Endo, her brother's best friend, who often came to play at the Kaidai house during those years.

"It's so mysterious, the way people's lives can be connected," she

murmured to herself.

When she focused her gaze on one of the pictures, it activated and played a video. It was from a piano concert when she was in middle school. Her family couldn't make it, but Arato and his sister had come in their place. Standing beside him, Shiori had a natural smile. Yuka Endo had been frightened of the hIE taking the picture, and was hiding behind Arato's back.

It was strange to think about how much his fate had changed recently.

Shiori's terminal vibrated quietly. She threw a coat on over her dressing gown before ordering her home system to display the call on a screen.

A 3D image of a man appeared near her door.

〈 Good evening, Ms. Shiori. Is now a good time? 〉 the man asked. Despite being somewhere in his fifties, the man looked unkempt. His name was Shunji Suzuhara, and he was the general manager of the MemeFrame Strategic Planning Office.

"It's good to see you," Shiori said, her tone polite. "How are you?"

Shunji, a person of some standing in the company, wouldn't normally be calling on a high schooler like Shiori directly. But she and her brother were both quite important figures for MemeFrame.

〈 We're making good progress on the Original Body. We should be able to produce some real results soon, 〉 Suzuhara said. While scratching at his sideburns with one hand, he flicked the finger of his free hand in the air. Whatever machine he was using understood the gesture, and began to transfer data to Shiori's terminal.

Shiori tore the top sheet from a bundle of authentication film that was connected to her terminal. The film confirmed her identity through DNA, fingerprint, and the impression of her bone structure, all of which were taken when she pressed upon the film. Once her identity had been confirmed, the film automatically unscrambled the encoded file.

"I know this isn't something I should be sticking my nose into, but thank you," Shiori said, as small mechanical noises echoed in the late-night stillness of her room. Her terminal, which was reserved for classified transmissions, flicked its LEDs to let her know that she was receiving the file.

〈 You've got a kind heart, Ms. Shiori, 〉 Suzuhara said, lowering his head humbly in his 3D image. 〈 I know that you know we're using you, 〉 he said. 〈 It's hard to believe you'd go this far for us. 〉

"I would like to win what is meant to be given to me, with my own hands," Shiori said. She was afraid of the gap she saw between the immature girl she was currently, and the immense power that would one day rest on her shoulders. In her heart, she knew that the

course she was plotting was arrogant in a way that could only be forgiven because of her youth.

〈 If you put it like that, it makes me feel a bit pathetic, showing you just how disappointing us adults can be, 〉 Suzuhara said, scratching his head with a look of chagrin.

Shiori had no idea what it felt like to be his age, single and childless.

“Ryo has been off doing something with Chief Watarai again,” Shiori said.

〈 The Computer Faction knows we’ve been in contact. Mr. Watarai wouldn’t miss a chance to shorten our leash, 〉 Suzuhara explained.

Two factions had developed within MemeFrame, divided by how they felt about their company being guided by the ultra high-performance AI Higgins. Members of the Computer Faction were fine leaving judgments of company policy to Higgins, trusting in its superhuman wisdom as they’d always done before. The other faction, the Human Faction, felt that humans should head human organizations. Shiori was currently lending her aid to the Human Faction, to which General Manager Suzuhara belonged.

Their relationship had begun as one might imagine: Suzuhara had greeted her at a company party she attended. But, to Shiori, it felt like his invitation was a validation of all the strict training she had been through in her life. Besides, she empathized with their desire to respect humanity.

“Has there been any movement from Higgins?” she asked.

〈 I’m afraid we’d have no way of knowing, even if there was, 〉 Suzuhara said with a sigh. Even within MemeFrame itself, information regarding Higgins was top-secret.

“I do understand that they want to prevent anyone from being able to misuse the ultra high-performance AIs,” Shiori mused. “But the security measures around Higgins are truly inconvenient.”

〈 Even if it’s an iron wall as far as attacks on its software goes, the actual hardware is pretty vulnerable if you can get close enough. Unfortunately, Watarai’s on the side that can get close to it, which makes things difficult for us. 〉

In the last century, when everyone wasn’t quite as used to operating ultra high-performance AIs, theft of one of the AIs had sparked off a war. Afterward, the Computer Faction had exploited strict information control policies, originally created as a wartime countermeasure, to their advantage in the struggle for dominance of MemeFrame.

Since specifics about how exactly Higgins interacted with the company were kept secret, there were rumors that the AIs

manipulation even extended into internal matters of company policy.

“I hate how Mr. Watarai and his group do things,” Shiori vented. “They worship Higgins like it’s a god, and they act like whether or not you are allowed to approach it decides how much power you have in the company. It’s embarrassing that we, a company whose main product is information, are deliberately trying to consolidate the right to access information in a single place and preserve the ignorance of anyone left on the outside.”

〈I completely understand your anger,〉 Suzuhara said. 〈But, right now, we need to keep our emotions in check. Things have been speeding up ever since the explosion. If we reveal what we know about the escaped Lacia-class hIEs, I can only imagine how dangerous things will get. Obviously we’ll be putting countermeasures in place, but for now, the most important thing is to lay low.〉 After saying his good-byes, he cut off the transmission.

Once again, Shiori was alone, feeling small in her large room. She stood still in the middle of her room, still wearing her dressing gown, while the pictures in the frames all around her flickered to show other scenes.

Even in this age of automation, nothing could stop the march of time. Her brother had given up on something, and Arato had picked up a Red Box hIE. The fact that the Kaidai household was empty didn’t change.

“This whole thing is foolish,” she murmured to herself. “But we’re living in a world where machines would keep everything running, even if humans all gave up. If I quit fighting against the things that I absolutely cannot accept, would my life have any meaning at all?” To Shiori, it felt like, if humans stopped fighting for the things worth fighting for, they would no longer have a place in the world.

Shiori’s home seemed to her to be a place full of light, since it was empty of anything else. When she was a small child, she had wondered why her family seemed incapable of staying still. She understood it now, though. If they didn’t work or do something with their time, they would begin to fear that there was no longer any meaning in their lives. Despite all the wealth she was born into, Shiori felt hunted by the inexorable march of progress.

Calling Arato Endo turned out to be far more embarrassing than Shiori had thought it would be. She realized that she hadn’t adjusted the volume on her terminal and quickly fixed it in a panic, fearing there would be feedback.

She invited Arato out to a cafe in Shinkiba, made entirely out of transparent materials. He arrived there with Lacia in tow.

Shiori couldn’t help but notice he was wearing a stylish t-shirt and coordinated pants again. “Did Lacia pick your outfit for you again?”

she asked.

He chuckled without a hint of hesitation. "Well, she's got a much better sense of style than I do," he said. "I didn't know hIEs could even take care of stuff like this." He took the seat opposite Shiori, with Lacia sitting by his side.

Lacia was in a muted pantsuit. She had probably picked it deliberately as something that wouldn't draw attention away from Shiori's clothes. Lacia had been wearing subdued clothing the last time Shiori saw Arato, too. The feeling that Lacia was taking special care on her behalf riled Shiori. It must have shown on her frozen expression, since Arato reacted to it.

"If you've got something you need to talk about, just tell me," he said. "You can trust me to keep it between us." That was the kind of person Arato was; always reaching out a friendly hand to help those around him. Still, his words helped Shiori relax, and she felt an imaginary warmth spreading in her chest.

"It's not really something I'm worried about, just something I wanted to talk about with you," Shiori explained. "This cafe is the only place I know where I can relax and talk openly."

One of the staff brought out her tea. It was brewed from a species of tea leaf only recently created to survive the changing environmental conditions in the old tea-growing climates.

"There's actually a favor I'd like to ask of you, Arato," Shiori said, firming her resolve. "Would you please return Type-005, Lacia, to our company?" she asked, watching Arato's expression closely. Not only did she want to witness for herself the depth of the wound she was opening, she also wanted to see just how strong Lacia's influence on him was.

Arato's response was a simple but sincere one. "Does Lacia belong to MemeFrame?" he asked.

"She's one of the hIEs who fled our Tokyo Research Lab on the night of the explosion in April," Shiori admitted.

"Oh," he murmured quietly.

Lacia was silent, just sitting there by his side.

"You aren't surprised by my request?" Shiori asked.

"Of course I am," he said. "But Ryo's been telling me from the start that I shouldn't get involved with Lacia. This actually explains it a bit. I don't get why he didn't just tell me straight out, though."

The bitter image of her family continuously fleeing played out in Shiori's mind. "My brother is apparently tired of dealing with company matters," she told him.

Arato tapped both hands together in rhythm over and over, apparently agitated. He wore his emotions so obviously Shiori couldn't help but pick up on them. She imagined it would be quite simple for

anyone to make him happy, even if they weren't a childhood friend like her.

"Oh, don't worry, Arato," she said. "Things aren't that bad in my family." As she casually lied, she drew his attention by pushing a plate of snacks toward him with an invitation to help himself. He followed the approaching snacks with his eyes, then reached out for them with a wide grin. The fact that Shiori got caught up in his mood and felt a little burst of happiness herself made her blush.

"I've often thought it would be nice if we humans had tails like dogs, but I believe there are a few people who already do," she said. She could almost see Arato with a tail, making loud swooshing whumps as it wagged back and forth against his chair legs.

But then Arato's face grew serious again. "I'm not going to hand over Lacia," he said. "Sorry, but you can't just say 'she's ours' and think that's that."

"Arato, Lacia's ID number is LSLX-22S99176LF, correct?" Shiori asked. She felt a pang of guilt in her heart at the thought of doubting someone precious to him, even if it did mean getting one of her rivals out of the way. Still, she wanted to face this head on, so there would be no regrets if it ended up ruining their relationship.

"If we assume that Lacia altered her own data and stole this number, we must then imagine that an actual unit exists that is the real owner of the number," she continued.

Arato didn't seem to understand what Shiori meant, and looked to Lacia for help. The machine, with her well-kept light purple hair, swiveled to face him and added a further explanation.

"There are two methods for verifying an hIE's ID number," Lacia told him. "First, it can be transmitted through radio signals, generally for crime prevention. The second way is to confirm the number physically imprinted on the hIE's frame. It is impossible to counterfeit the physical ID number imprint without access to exact specification data, so it should be impossible for another unit to bear the same ID number as me. In such a case, one of us would obviously be a fake."

And Arato very quickly arrived at the realization Lacia's words guided him to. "Oh, so you think Lacia's a fake, Shiori?"

After he listened so attentively to her honest feelings, the sight of Arato passively following along with what Lacia said put Shiori on edge. "Arato, you need to stop trusting in that Red Box so much. You are being controlled," she said, venting her frustration.

"That's what Ryo keeps telling me," he said. "But I'm seriously not as dumb as you guys seem to think I am."

Shiori could feel the conversation turning into an argument, so she bit back her response.

Arato, though, couldn't seem to let the conversation die. "I know

I'm a bit dumb. I'll admit to that. But I'm telling you, I've thought this one through," he said.

"You're a kind person," Shiori said, "but you're being taken advantage of." Even she knew how to manipulate him, and she was nowhere near as cunning as a Red Box. "Lacia doesn't think about the world the same way we do," she went on. "Is there really a reason you've thought of why you need something like that by your side forever?"

She unfolded a paper-like terminal she had prepared on the clear tabletop. It displayed a girl with brown skin. The girl was different in every way from Lacia, but she had a cute, childish face with big, round eyes. "This is the original body that bears Lacia's ID number. She was ordered to be a replacement for the daughter of a rich man in Egypt," she said.

Lacia looked like she was about to say something, so Shiori plunged ahead with her explanation. "Many people order hIEs to be replacements for spouses or family members who passed away," she said. "In those cases, images and videos of the person before they passed away, as well as data from their home systems and hIE user data, are utilized to create a custom behavioral control cloud, so that the hIE can imitate the deceased perfectly."

"Oh," said Arato, only mildly interested.

"Replacement hIEs are meant to be as perfectly human as possible," Shiori continued. "So the system commands normally used to control them as tools are frozen. When Lacia got kidnapped, the supplier wasn't able to use her tracking function, correct? I'm sure Lacia picked this ID number specifically because it came with a useful built-in restriction that she could take advantage of."

"Okay. But when I asked the service counter at the supplier, they said I was listed as the owner," Arato shot back.

Lacia had chosen the number knowing that it wasn't currently assigned to an owner. The meticulous planning that had gone into this made Shiori's stomach turn.

"Due to various circumstances," she explained, "this unit was donated to a hospital only a few months after she was delivered. The hospital was low on manpower, and didn't have the time or resources to care whether one of their nurse hIEs had a legitimate ID number or owner."

Apparently the owner had remarried, and his new wife wasn't crazy about the idea of having an hIE that looked like her husband's dead daughter. So, they had decided to let the hIE fulfill one of the goals the daughter had before she passed away and sent her to work as a nurse at the hospital.

"What's her name?" Arato asked.

“What?” Shiori was so surprised by the question she had to ask him to repeat it.

“We’re sort of connected by fate, don’t you think? So I’d like to at least know what to call her,” he said.

“Marina. Marina Saffron,” Shiori replied.

Arato’s eyes softened. “Got it. Well, it’s good that she’s happy where she is now. I get that hIEs don’t have hearts, but it’s nice to have a positive ending to a dramatic story like that,” he said.

It was him saying things like that that made it impossible for Shiori to dislike Arato. Her face felt hot, so she reached for some tea. “Arato, I know this is an improper request, but would you please consider it?” she asked.

“By ‘it’, you mean handing Lacia over to you?” he asked bluntly.

“MemeFrame is divided right now,” she said. “It seems one of the factions has been acting to recover Lacia and her sisters in the utmost secrecy.”

According to General Manager Suzuhara, Ginza Watarai from the Computer Faction was dangerous. There were even rumors that he had orchestrated the explosion at the Tokyo Research Lab for some reason. If the rumors were true, he had gone too far.

“And you can’t do whatever it is you need to do without Lacia?” he asked.

“She may have recorded images of the culprit behind the explosion at the research labs. Without the actual unit there to confirm the authenticity of the images, though, we won’t be able to use them to pin down whoever it was,” Shiori said. “We need her, Arato.”

“Okay, I can understand that,” Arato said gently. “But this whole thing is an internal struggle in the company, right? There’s no reason you should be involved in this, Shiori.”

When she had come asking for help, Suzuhara and the others had gladly given her the push she needed. These people, hanging their hopes on her prioritized human relationships and morale, supported her admittedly unpredictable actions. She felt blessed to have people like them taking a 10th-grader like her, with her naive sense of justice and weak connections, into their confidence.

“This is just the way I am,” Shiori said. “After my brother gave up, it fell to me to think of the future of our company.” When her brother had suddenly given up the fight as a child, Arato had become her only ally. However, if their friendship wasn’t enough to decide the matter, she would just have to rely on her own capabilities.

Shiori assumed the conversation was over, but Arato suddenly spoke again. “By the way, what did you mean by an ‘improper’ request? What part of it was ‘improper?’” he asked.

Shiori's cheeks felt like they had just caught fire. It was at that moment that she realized why she had really come there. Her actual request was, 'Please throw Lacia away and become my ally again.'

Just as he had told Shiori, Arato was only half-surprised by her request. After how big of a thing the Oi Industry Promotion Center terrorist attack had become, he had been preparing himself a bit for Lacia's original creators to come looking for her. He just hadn't expected the request to come from Shiori.

Once he had said good bye to Shiori, Arato walked with Lacia over to Shin-Koiwa Station, and then asked her to stop. Yuka looked up to Shiori Kaidai, so he didn't want to have this conversation at home.

He wanted to ask Lacia what she thought he should do, but he had just been called out by Shiori for being controlled by Lacia.

Since it was a request from Shiori, Arato felt like he needed to make this decision as Lacia's owner. Back when they were all in grade school, Arato had acted as Shiori's older brother. She often came to the hospital back then, whether because she was lonely or because she was worried about Ryo, who was an inpatient there. Whenever she came, Arato would look after her in place of Ryo, who wanted some space between himself and his family. He also wanted to come up with his own answer to counter her scolding him for being dumb.

"Did you know that you were built by MemeFrame, Lacia?" Arato asked. "You could have at least told me that much." He watched from the auto-car rental spot as an automatic truck pulled away from the supermarket in front of the station, carrying groceries. As long as the location was within a kilometer you could get an auto-car to pick up your groceries for you, so the place was always crowded around dinner time.

"I apologize for withholding information," Lacia said, stopping on the spot. Her words startled Arato. "I desired for you to be my owner, Arato," she confessed.

"You can't just drop something like that on me out of the blue," Arato said. "Besides, hIEs don't have hearts, right?" He figured that she must have been mistaken. After all, it was Lacia herself that had explained to him the clear difference between humans and hIEs.

"I do not possess a heart, but you told me you trusted me, Arato. I require an owner like you," she said. Lacia's brows drew down, and the cloudy look on her face sent a pang stabbing through Arato's heart.

He remembered Methode's attack, and what Ryo had said to him then. "Because I'm just dumb enough to stick with you, right?" he

asked. There were certain things that hurt a lot more coming from Shiori, a member of the opposite sex, than they had coming from Ryo, a fellow male. For example, having her tell him that his affection for a female hIE was nothing but an analog hack was so painful, it made him feel like he was going to lose his mind.

All the people coming out of the south exit of Shin-Koiwa Station looked at Lacia as they headed toward the nearby residential district. Among them, a few of the girls glanced at Arato, but only very rarely. He was wearing clothes Lacia had picked out for him again. He wondered when he had started leaving so many things to her, and strangely, couldn't quite remember.

"What am I doing of my own volition anymore?" he murmured to himself. It felt a bit embarrassing to compare himself to the hard-working Shiori.

Among the human figures walking against the backdrop of the setting sun, 20% were hIEs. Of the people who looked to be in their twenties or thirties, 40% were hIEs. The population of Japan had been falling since the 21st century, and had already reached 80 million. Use of hIEs had spread to cover the labor shortage, so most of the folks driving home with groceries were hIEs, too. Living with Lacia had taught Arato all the slight differences that allowed him to tell them apart from humans.

In the highly automated city, it almost seemed that it was the humans who were just being kept around to give meaning to the machines. In comparison, Arato thought Shiori was doing the right thing in trying to cleave out her own place in the world.

"That is something you must decide for yourself, Arato," Lacia said, leaving the choice to him, as she tended to.

Desire welled up within Arato. When you got right down to it, the reason Lacia had been by his side since April was because he wanted her there. If he didn't want her to get stolen from him, he would need to do something about the original body that Shiori was having shipped to Japan.

But, with his mind caught up, Arato couldn't just press ahead in that direction. It got caught on a single doubt: was this really his own decision, or was he deciding that it needed to be done because that was the conclusion he had been cornered into?

It had been Shiori's guidance that was making his head such a mess just then. In other words, even though he knew he was easy to manipulate, it was much easier for a girl to wrap him around her finger than even he believed.

Lacia was just standing by, watching over him quietly. His brain couldn't take much more of just standing there in silence.

"Please let me stay by your side," she said, and moved closer to

him.

Arato didn't know if his image of her was correct or not. But he did know that he wanted to stay with her for a long time. If a little hang-up like this drove them apart, there was no way their relationship would survive for any amount of time.

"But that means we'd have to mess things up for Shiori and MemeFrame. We'd be fighting against Ryo's company," Arato said.

Arato had made Lacia come with him to save Kengo, and he had rushed desperately to save her when she was kidnapped. The only thing different about this situation was that the opponent was Shiori. If he couldn't overcome this hurdle, that would just be a sign that his feelings were too weak. It was a painful thought.

"I just need to think about this a little," he said.

"There is no time for that," Lacia said. "Shiori Kaidai is not a fool. She would not have revealed so much information to you unless her plan was already close to fruition. Close enough that she is already trying to prepare you for after it's all over."

"Wait, hold on," Arato said. "Are you saying that you think Shiori already has her hands on that unit with the same number as you?" He covered both eyes with his hands. They were still in front of the station, so this drew a few stares. Only then did he start to worry that someone might be eavesdropping on their conversation. Unable to stand still, he started walking.

"Shiori Kaidai and those she works for are suspicious of me," Lacia pointed out. "I believe they are worried that I would come and destroy Marina Saffron if I found that they had sent one of their staff to Luxor, where the hospital is. They are most likely already having her carried to Japan."

"Do we have any way to stop them?" Arato asked. Things were moving too fast. It was time to run first and think about what to do afterward.

"First, let's consider what would happen if I were to be returned to MemeFrame," Lacia said. "Once they have a qualified service confirm that they have two units with the same ID number, we will both be sent to Stylus for an inspection. In that case, they would easily discover that I am not an ordinary hIE unit." Arato noticed that this was probably the first time Lacia had admitted to being a Red Box.

"What happens after they inspect you?" he asked.

"It's a legal gray area, but I think Stylus will return me to my creators — MemeFrame — should MemeFrame demand it. There are cases in which, when it is impossible to determine the basis for an AI's actions, the rights and responsibilities for that AI are returned to the manufacturer rather than the owner. If that were to happen and you were to try and sue MemeFrame for my return, I believe that you

would be silenced.”

Lacia was a product of the automated city, a machine no human could possibly understand. There was so much Arato didn't know about her, like her goals, or why she wanted to stay by his side.

“Seems like you're predicting my thoughts before I even have time to think them. Which one of us is the owner, here?” Arato asked.

“You're a wonderful owner, Arato,” Lacia told him. “I believe you're speaking of Shiori Kaidai already having the unit brought over from Egypt to compare our ID numbers, as well as my predicting that you would reject the idea of me undertaking that inspection, correct?”

Arato felt like she was deflecting him, but he couldn't bring himself to press any harder, and Lacia's explanation switched gears to the finer details of her plan. “When the ID service inspects the validity of a unit, they will always utilize the ID number. LSLX-22S type hIEs broadcast their ID number from a chip in our medulla oblongata. If we simply prevent the reading of this signal, as well as the number printed on the hIE's frame, there will be no need to actually destroy the unit,” she said.

“Well, that makes me feel a little better,” Arato said. “It would be too sad for that kid, Marina, to be thrown away by her owner, have her identity stolen, and be taken to Japan, only to end up being destroyed.” Just saying it made Arato feel depressed.

“LSLX-22S series hIEs have their ID numbers imprinted in three locations,” Lacia continued. “The first is five centimeters long, on the clavicle of the frame. The second is two millimeters long, and is imprinted somewhere along the spine. The third is in a location that must be specially requested by a qualified ID service representative, and is one micrometer long.”

“One *micrometer*?!” Arato exclaimed incredulously. “How the hell are we gonna find that?”

“A single cell of human blood is seven micrometers in diameter,” Lacia said. “It would be impossible to see this imprint with the naked eye. This mark is specifically designed for crime prevention. To find this smallest mark without completely taking apart the hIE, one requires specialized equipment and prior knowledge of the location. Many cases of hIE theft have been resolved thanks to the presence of this marking.”

“So what are you going to do?” Arato asked.

“I have already obtained the location of all ID markings from Stylus's servers,” Lacia told him, and then looked up at his face. Shadowed by the cloudy sky, she seemed to be standing by, waiting for his decision.

Walking with her beside him, Arato wondered why the people who first created hIEs had decided to give them realistic body

warmth. The heat in her hand made him hesitate to let it go.

“What shall we do?” she asked. “If I am no longer necessary, I will simply wait to be collected.” She may have lacked a heart, but her gaze was serious. Arato figured she must have already done even more preparation than what she had described to him. But she was willing to throw that all away, depending on how he answered.

She was heartless, but he wasn’t. That simple fact created doubt. But, as much reluctance as he felt, he felt even more affection for her. His heart soared whenever he peeked at her face in profile, and wondered if it was possible for her to love him, despite having no heart.

Even though he was walking down the same old street he always did, Arato felt like his feet were carrying him through an unknown wasteland. He was scared. He didn’t know what he wanted to do, or what he was about to do, possibly because he was considering doing two completely contradictory things at the same time.

“We must also consider the possibility of an attack from Methode,” Lacia said. “If you were to hand me over right now, it would ensure your safety.”

But Arato was thinking about the good times he’d had with Lacia. Through her, he’d gotten a taste of the thrill of becoming something greater than himself. The only reason he hadn’t been able to do anything when Methode attacked was that he had hesitated, and hadn’t used Lacia properly.

Arato was at an impasse. He had already used Lacia for his convenience too many times to write himself off as a victim, caught up in events beyond his control. And, he had received far too many warnings to plead ignorance.

“Lacia, the way you act and talk, it’s all perfect. But there’s no real meaning behind any of it,” Arato mused. “So do I just really like how you look or act? Or do I actually just think it’s better liking a girl who doesn’t have a heart?” Then, after a pause: “Sorry. It doesn’t matter if you’re human or not, that was rude.”

She continued to hold his hand, her delicate fingers almost entwined with his in her grip. It was her answer, conveyed without words. Lacia spoke her mind with her body, not wanting to push an answer on Arato in his uncertainty by responding with words.

“Even your reaction right now is perfect,” Arato sighed.

“I am a machine, and you are my owner,” Lacia said. “We machines can only exist together with humans if we are able to fulfill the desires of our owners.”

He, a human, and she, a robot, were walking, their strides perfectly in sync. It should have only been a short time since they started walking, but Arato felt like they had been going on for a while.

“So, please tell me your desires,” Lacia continued. “Do you remember Kouka’s words? That if my actions are boring, it is only because you have chosen a boring use for me. If you are hurting, please use me in such a way that I can relieve that pain.” She wasn’t a human, just a robot wearing a human face, but he felt like they were deeply connected. She gazed at him with her pale blue eyes.

The atmosphere should have been romantic, but there was something just as pleasant in this slightly different feeling. If Arato told Lacia he loved her, she would obviously say she loved him back. He would be ecstatic, but there would still be no heart behind Lacia’s words.

“If we were the only two people on Earth, I wouldn’t need to worry about boring things like whether you have a heart or not,” Arato mused.

Lacia showed him a bright, loving smile. Arato didn’t know what the smile meant, but when she rested her head against his shoulder as they walked, he could smell the shampoo they had gotten from the ‘boy meets girl’ plan in her hair.

“Would you like to use me to reduce the population of this world to just us two?” she asked.

“I don’t think we need to go that far,” Arato said quickly.

Lacia narrowed her eyes mischievously. Arato felt like the road in front of him stretched off beyond the setting sun. No, no need to go that far. But, in Arato’s heart of hearts, he knew he didn’t want to hand Lacia over to anyone. Even if she didn’t have a heart. Even if she wasn’t even a human.

“You said we could scratch out that hIE Marina Saffron’s ID numbers without breaking her, right?” he asked. “If so, let’s just go do that.” He wasn’t happy with the decision. The instant he said it, the joy and pain that warred in his heart made him clench his teeth.

He felt like he had sunk so much deeper into this than that night at the school, when they stood on the roof together. His feelings for her had grown until he was now willing to throw away his life, and commit a sin for her sake.

Shiori was alerted the instant Arato Endo started to move.

Suzuhara and the others had only agreed to let her negotiate with him on the condition that he be placed under observation.

Shiori had gotten herself involved with this case so that, when she was an adult, these people would remember that she had made a name for herself in this crisis. She knew the whole reason Suzuhara and the others had invited her to their faction was in the hope that she would act as a unifying force for them. The Human Faction still

believed that they needed a human leader, even in this age of ultra high-performance AIs. They had even convinced her father, Tsuyoshi Kaidai, of this. Her involvement had received parental consent.

“You certainly seem to enjoy working with your hands, Shiori,” Mika Tsutsumi, manager of the MemeFrame Behavior Control Program Planning Section, said, peering at Shiori’s crafting.

Mika was working with a paper-thin terminal on a desk that pulled down from the roof of the vehicle they were riding in.

Shiori looked up from her own suspended desk, which had a crafting board fixed to it. “I like the feel of the tools in my hands,” she said. “Though, since I’m directing the blade myself, it doesn’t always turn out that great.”

Her hand, controlling the ultrasonic cutting tool, slipped a little, sliding smoothly through a bit of metal clay that she had intended to turn into the ear of a dog. The ultrasonic vibrations of the cutter reduced friction between the blade and the material, which made carving much easier than it would have been with a traditional knife.

They were in the cabin of a limousine speeding down the Tomei Expressway, but the vehicle ran so smoothly that Shiori could easily spend her time riding doing delicate craftwork without fear of shaking.

“Nice,” Mika said. “I used to do sports in school, and I definitely agree. There’s just something about doing things with your own hands.” Mika was in her thirties, but she talked like she was one of Shiori’s high school classmates. Sitting side-by-side on the limo’s leather seats with her, Shiori was glad that Mika was an easy person to talk to.

“Basketball, right?” Shiori asked. In college, Mika had been a basketball player. Shiori thought it might be nice to experience lively competition against a human opponent like that.

“Yeah. Haven’t done it in a while, though,” Mika admitted. “But man, I’d love to do some athletics again. Want to come along, Shiori?”

Shiori had needed to apologize to Suzuhara and his people for the negotiations with Arato breaking down. Then, instead of the hIE sharing an ID with Lacia being sent to Haneda Airport as was planned, a mix-up on the Egypt side had sent it to the Chubu International Airport in Aichi Prefecture.

So, she had volunteered to take a car out to Aichi to pick up the hIE. Considering when the flight from Egypt should have left, it was clear to Shiori that Arato’s Red Box must have been putting countermeasures in motion well before their little afternoon chat. It appeared that Lacia had played everyone there for a fool. She hadn’t needed to counter Shiori’s moves; she had already beaten her to the punch.

“I think I’ll take you up on that offer, thanks,” Shiori said. “Could I bring a friend along as well?”

“Oh, of course, of course,” Mika said, grinning as though she had guessed Shiori’s intent. Mika was the type of person that held themselves to a high standard, and enjoyed the feeling of being up to that standard. Shiori was also the hard-working type, so they got along well.

“How idiotic,” an orange-haired hIE sitting on the edge of the L-shaped limousine seat murmured. It was Methode, the clearly mechanical fourth unit of the Lacia-class hIEs. “Why the hell are we using such a roundabout plan?” she asked, lifting her chin a little insolently. “Why don’t we just attack Lacia and her owner directly?”

Shiori had to keep herself in check from recoiling at the inhuman violence in Methode’s words. “I would like to avoid direct conflict if at all possible,” Shiori told her. “We don’t yet know the limits of what you are capable of.”

“For an owner, you sure don’t have much faith in your tool,” Methode muttered.

“Yes, I could be considered your owner,” Shiori agreed. “But Ginga Watarai is also your owner. In fact, how many owners do you have?”

“I wanted MemeFrame to be my owner, but they turned me down,” Methode said. “They didn’t want to take responsibility for the actions of a Red Box like me. So I had to settle for looking for an individual to be my owner.”

Shiori’s lack of trust toward the Lacia-class hIEs had a lot to do with Methode’s arrogant demeanor.

“I must say, it seems like quite a programming defect for an hIE to be able to decide for itself to take on more than one owner,” Shiori commented. “I don’t believe that’s a burden you should expect a person responsible for you to shoulder.”

Methode had come to Shiori a few days after the terrorist attack on the Oi Industry Promotion Center in late April. Thinking back on it now, Shiori felt that Methode must have seen right through the inferiority complex she felt toward her brother, and the fear she had of losing her place in the world. Methode had told her that Lacia, the hIE by Arato’s side, was a Red Box just like her. Just as Shiori had wished, she had become the owner of this dangerous tool.

“Shouldn’t we be more worried about your attraction to that boy?” Methode asked, quirking one corner of her mouth up. “The only reason a school kid like you is here is because you’re my owner.”

Methode’s way of smiling made Shiori uncomfortable; it looked too similar to Ginga Watarai’s. “I had no idea you would turn out to be this unreliable,” Shiori said.

“Aren’t you happy to have a job that only you can do? Just try your best to keep me under control,” Methode said. “If you can use me better than anyone else, I’ll obey you alone.”

Shiori had grudging respect for Methode’s search for self-actualization in this automated world, but it was difficult to play along with the hIE’s request, considering how difficult it was to control her.

“Now that we’re on the subject,” Methode said, “Arato Endo reached out to Kengo Suguri for help, correct? It wouldn’t take much power to take over that beat-up little restaurant his family runs. We should crush it.”

“There is far too much risk of drawing the attention of the police compared to a very poor return,” Shiori said. “No need to complicate things; we’re far enough ahead of things as we are.”

Their limousine used the automated navigation lane on the Tomei Expressway, which had a more relaxed speed limit, to head toward Nagoya. The package from Egypt was set to arrive at the Chubu International Airport by 8:30 PM.

The convoy Shiori was traveling in consisted of the limo she was in with Mika Tsutsumi — who was tasked with providing the ID confirmation service for Stylus — and two other vehicles that acted as escorts. The escort vehicles were full of mercenaries from a private military company that MemeFrame had a contract with. Shiori hadn’t been given very much information about them.

As if anticipating combat, Methode began to describe her opponent’s capabilities:

“Type-005 Lacia’s abilities are mainly focused around digital warfare, such as high-level hacking functions,” she explained. “She can also bend light to render herself or other objects invisible. She can utilize the electromagnetic field created by her device to fire projectiles, like a railgun. Of course, all of these are the powers of her device, Black Monolith. Without that, she’s just a high-spec hIE.”

“Then victory is ours, is it not?” Shiori asked. “Of the transportation methods I can think of that would allow her to carry her device, nothing should be able to arrive at the airport before us.”

Shiori had already asked Higgins about Lacia’s abilities, but the details it had given her were far too technical for a human to understand. When she had asked it to explain in terms a human would understand, it had given her a vague response with the excuse that AIs were constantly expanding. Neither Shiori nor Suzuhara knew Lacia’s true capabilities. Shiori thought even Watarai, who was in charge of the Tokyo Research Labs, didn’t know. If they had been able to grasp Lacia’s limits, they would have taken her on much sooner.

“Could you defeat her?” Shiori asked.

“If you don’t choose a form for your request, the intent will be taken from us,” Methode said. In her roundabout way, Methode was referring to the method of her use as a ‘form,’ and their goal as ‘intent.’ Before they had left, Methode had stuffed a case large enough to fit a human inside the trunk of the limousine. She didn’t seem to know what was inside it, but the Red Box had insisted that it would be their ace in the hole.

Even if Arato and Lacia came chasing after them, they wouldn’t make it in time. Once the hIE arrived at Chubu International Airport and Shiori and the others collected her, they would be able to confirm the hIE’s ID number anywhere they wanted. Arato, who was still in Tokyo, had no way to stop them. They were already more than halfway to their destination.

Shiori was more worried about Arato. She hoped Lacia didn’t manipulate him into doing something reckless.

At Lacia’s request, Arato rode the high-speed main railway from Tokyo Station. He had already contacted Yuka and told her he would be staying with a friend that night. After adding some money to his pocket terminal’s ID tag, he ran and jumped onto a train that stopped at Nagoya.

The high-speed railway had increased train speed over the years until it could now send a train from Tokyo to Osaka in less than an hour and a half. Nagoya, between Tokyo and Osaka, had been significantly disadvantaged by these advances. Japan’s population had been cut to two-thirds of its historical maximum, and population decline varied by region. The Tokai and Chubu regions were among those hit particularly hard.

“It says fifty minutes to Nagoya Station,” Arato said.

“The flight from Egypt will arrive at 8:30 PM at the Chubu International Airport,” Lacia said. “If, after everything is over, you are able to ride the first train on the high-speed rail, you may be able to make it back in time for school.”

Lacia had gotten a seat on the aisle side. Arato had gotten a window seat, so he sat down first.

“Guess I’ll have a packed meal for dinner,” Arato said, as a catering service member pushed a metal trolley into the train car from the platform. Passengers could order packaged meals from the station with their pocket terminals, which the catering staff would deliver right to their seats.

The sun had already gone down and it was dark outside, but it was still only 7:00 PM.

Arato tried to call Ryo, but his friend turned down the call with a

short text. Things had been awkward with Ryo ever since the incident during the photo shoot. He had asked Kengo for help, too, but it was doubtful whether or not he would have time to do anything.

The express train started to move. As it rode the magnetic rail under the covered overpass, the change in air pressure made Arato's ears pop. Tokyo's night cityscape blurred by outside the window at impressive speed. To dampen the noise from the high speed train passing by, as well as lower wind resistance, the entire overpass was covered with a clear enclosure.

It seemed like only an instant after they left the station that they passed through Shinagawa. The train then headed west. The density of the lights shining against the night dropped off quickly; population decline had shrunk the boundaries of the capital. Of course, Tokyo still had high population density, but it no longer extended on forever. There almost seemed to be a line in the city, beyond which were nothing but ghost towns. The path from Shinagawa to Shin-Yokohama used to be one long stretch of residential and commercial districts. Now, it was full of empty lots and forests of plants reclaiming the land.

After a long stretch of dark night, Arato saw a large facility with shining lights; food factories needed large amounts of water to function, so they were all built near rivers and coastal areas where they had ready access to it. Most food was 60% water, and manmade food also required water for processing. Small- to medium-sized food factories dotted Japan. They existed to support local agriculture, and also provided a stable base for local industry.

When the train entered Shizuoka, nothing but mountains and trees spread as far as the eye could see.

Suddenly, Arato saw a pillar of light fall, far off where the Pacific Ocean lay. It was a microwave beam, shot from one of the geosynchronous energy satellites through a relay satellite to the receiving station on Earth. The microwaves in the beam were tightly regulated, so they didn't actually give off light to the naked eye. Instead, the elevated cover the train was running under caught light from weak waves reflecting off the receptor.

Since Shizuoka was the site of a nuclear reactor that had broken down during the great Tokai earthquake, it was the ideal spot to create the first energy receiving station in Japan. Japan's energy needs were covered with all types of energy-generating methods, scattered across the country. The night view had become a little more lonely than the views of past Japan that Arato saw in videos, but the energy requirements of computers and signal relays had become quite large.

An information display on the monitor in Arato's window told him that Shizuoka utilized special cultivation techniques and its long

history of tea-making to produce large amounts of artificial tea leaves. Bright lights illuminated a recreation field where workers were playing soccer. Industries tied to human survival were manned by humans. That way, even if all the machines broke down, human society would still have the food and water it needed to survive. That precaution was proof that the trust the country placed in machines and AI had its limits. All over the country, you could find people sympathetic with ideals like those of the Antibody Network.

Arato watched his country speed by outside the window of the train. When he thought about it, all the massive ruins he was seeing were tools built for human use. But, in the end, they had all been laid low by ever-expanding human activity.

"There is no need to worry. This world belongs to humans," Lacia said from the next seat. "Humans will never relinquish direct control of systems related to their survival to high-performance AIs. Even fifty years after the birth of the first high-performance AI, they are still only used for research purposes, and are not allowed direct access to any networks."

She reached forward and pulled out Arato's table. The packed meal he'd ordered had arrived.

"Sure, for now," Arato mused. "But what about in a hundred years?"

"In that much time, there will obviously be changes," Lacia said. "It is up to you, Arato, and your kind, to decide what the result of those changes will be."

Arato opened the packed meal, and steam from the grilled meat puffed out. Things had certainly changed in the last hundred years. Forget fish and vegetables, manmade beef and pork were now superior to the originals. Even eggs were better out of a bottle.

"As I said, this world belongs to you humans, so I think you should sit down and have a long talk with Ms. Shiori," Lacia added.

"About what?" Arato asked.

"About her 'indecent' request," Lacia said.

About the time Arato finished eating his meal, the lights outside his window were growing in number from business hotels and apartments.

〈 We will arrive in Nagoya in five minutes. 〉 The announcement rang through the train, and a fraction of the passengers stood up to disembark. The high-speed rail had arrived in the center of the city, surrounded by city signs.

It was Arato's first time getting off of a train at Nagoya Station. That, plus the thought that he hadn't even thought of the possibility that he might be going there that evening a few hours ago, made it feel like he had traveled quite far. Nagoya's nightscape seemed far

more human to Arato than it had appeared from the railway. Besides that, the average age was higher, and the number of hIEs was visibly less than in Tokyo. Thanks to all the fully automated vehicle rental places in Tokyo, the taxi industry had all but died out. In Nagoya, they were so abundant that the entire pick-up area in front of the station was full of them. The fifty-year-old buildings stuck out to Arato's eyes, and the whole place was full of the vibrancy of life.

"The Tokai region has seen a population decline since the middle of the last century," Lacia said. "As there were no new industries starting up, there was no need for new city developments."

Arato flipped out his pocket terminal, but Lacia had already made preparations beforehand. "I have reserved an automatic vehicle in your name to take us to the Chubu International Airport," she said. "Persons under the age of eighteen are prohibited from renting vehicles after 8:00 PM, so I arranged for the vehicle thirty minutes ago."

The automated vehicle couldn't enter the station front due to the crowd of taxis. According to Lacia's guidance, they would have to walk for quite a ways to meet up with it.

"After this is all over, I'll have to pick up some famous Nagoya goods before I head home," Arato joked.

"It would be best to avoid any tourism," Lacia responded seriously. "This region is a hot spot for Antibody Network activity."

Arato hadn't expected to hear that name there. "They've got those guys here, too?" he grumped.

"Groups like that aren't confined to just Tokyo, or even just Japan," Lacia responded. "There are similar groups throughout the world. Nearly half of any taxi company's spending is on labor costs, yet here we see mostly human-driven taxis. This suggests that this area excludes hIEs from these jobs, despite it not making financial sense."

The narrow street they were walking down seemed to grow more ominous in Arato's eyes. With Lacia by his side, he felt like not getting close to any parking lots or abandoned facilities.

Once they reached the automated vehicle, he jumped in, and they drove off as if something was chasing them. They headed toward the Chubu International Airport, located along the Ise Bay on the Chita Peninsula. Their auto car zipped down the expressway with impressive speed. Unlike in Tokyo, there was no regulation in Nagoya making it a violation of the Road Traffic Act to drive a vehicle that wasn't fully automated.

In the front passenger seat, Arato was overwhelmed by the luxurious interior, as well as the speed of the vehicle. "This thing isn't fully automated, is it?" he asked.

“The Mercury Benz ES09 Automatic model has support for automated control,” Lacia explained. “There is no need to worry.”

Their speed climbed to over 200 km/h. Thanks to the same hacking prowess Lacia had used to instantly hack the car rental shop’s system, the cameras along their route, meant to capture speeding violations, couldn’t see them.

Lacia was at the wheel. “We needed a fast and durable vehicle, so I chose one,” she said simply.

The flight from Egypt would arrive at 8:30 PM. It had already been 8:00 PM when the express train had arrived at Nagoya. They didn’t have time to take it slow. Still, Arato couldn’t help but be a little freaked out by going so fast that every little bump in the road made it feel like the vehicle was flying off the ground.

“Hey, if we break this, will we be able to pay for it?” he asked.

“Please don’t worry,” Lacia said. “In the event of an accident, I have prepared six *mon* in old coins.”

“So I’m gonna die?”

Lacia’s dry joke referred to the fee used to pay for passage across the Sanzu River to enter the afterlife. The speedometer climbed over 300 km/h.

There weren’t any tall buildings around the road on the Chita Peninsula. Instead, the area was full of old farms and logistics centers for cargo from the bay. The Chubu International Airport had been turned into a 24-hour freight airport to support the Chubu area’s flagging economy. Since the construction of the space elevator in the latter half of the 21st century, the sea routes had become unstable in Southeast Asia, which led to many companies moving their logistics into the air. The Chubu Airport had prevented the area from sinking into economic decline when the sea shipping industry in the area had dried up.

Arato gazed at the scenery as it shot away behind him. They zipped by vehicles heading in the opposite direction without slowing.

“If we were in this much of a hurry, we should have gone straight here from Shinkiba instead of heading toward home before turning around,” Arato moaned.

Something like a stone slammed into the white hood of the car, throwing the vehicle off balance. The nose began to swing violently left and right. The tires squealed as the automated system corrected itself. Arato was getting a very bad feeling about this.

“I am intercepting a transmission from a vehicle approximately one kilometer ahead. I will play it over the car’s speakers,” Lacia said.

Against a background of light static, a deep voice shook the air in the vehicle.

〈Mirai, is the Lacia-class moving?〉 It was a man’s voice that

Arato had never heard before. Whoever it was, the person on the other end of Lacia's 'wiretap' knew they were there.

A young girl's voice responded. 〈She's doing naughty things with her owner.〉

Neither voice seemed to be aware they were being eavesdropped on.

〈Shouldn't we just shoot the owner? I mean, I'd feel bad for him, but still...〉 the female voice said. She was talking about Arato, who felt a sudden chill at the thought of some unknown person casually deciding whether or not to shoot him. The thing that had struck the front of the car just a moment ago had been a bullet.

Unconsciously, Arato looked to Lacia for help. "They're aiming for me," he said.

"We have been tailed since our conversation with Shiori Kaidai in the afternoon. Based on the transmissions I have intercepted, I can infer that orders were given to slow us down. Those responsible are currently driving near the interchange ahead. Shall I dispose of them?" Lacia asked.

'Dispose.' She said the word without emotion. Though the car was slowing down, nothing could slow the hammering of Arato's heart. He felt like the rules of reality had somehow changed on him. But, with Lacia, he had the means for getting the power and information he needed to face this new reality in his hands.

"Don't say 'dispose of,'" he said. "All I need you to do is stop them from attacking."

"Without my device, my capabilities are severely limited," Lacia warned. Her abilities to turn invisible or fire projectiles were accomplished through transformations of her metal coffin. Without that Black Monolith, she was no longer omnipotent.

Around them, the lights of the residential district were dwindling, and being replaced by logistics centers and food factories. The only thing that stood out as well-maintained was the road for automatic vehicles, connecting Nagoya and the airport.

Arato wanted to run. His brain was telling him he should give up. But, he had already come this far. And, looking at Lacia's profile as she controlled their vehicle at 200 km/h, he thought that wasn't the only reason he wanted to keep going. In this automated world, he had gained the power to reach his own goals, and he could wield that power freely.

Their vehicle entered the Centrair Line route, and the night around Arato seemed wider than any sky he had seen before. The thrill of looking up at that sky awakened a feeling of desire, even in a good-natured guy like Arato. He wanted to see a future with Lacia by his side.

While perfectly controlling the vehicle, she turned to look at him expectantly, awaiting his orders. She didn't want him to cling to her desperately, with worry in his eyes, but rather to show her a strong will, ready to seize the world with his own hands.

"Tell me. Who are these guys? How are we going to stop them?" he asked.

He had the strange feeling that Lacia smiled when she answered. "They are a private military company known as the 'Hands of Operation,'" she explained. "When Japan re-armed itself, many posts in the old Self-Defense Force were restructured. Private military companies became a popular destination for SDF members let go during that time. HOO is a third-sector group, one of the PMCs started in Japan."

"How do we get them to stop attacking?" he asked again in reply.

"Contracts from the Japanese government are the lifeline for all Japan-made PMCs," Lacia responded. "To not lose their government support, they are required to stick to a strict code of ethics and refrain from any dangerous actions within the country."

Their car approached a trailer truck in front of them on the road. Arato figured they would easily pass the truck but, instead, it accelerated until it was maintaining a distance of 200 kilometers between them.

"Arato, I will be exiting the vehicle, so please take care of the wheel while I'm out," Lacia said. Then, she opened the driver's side door. With the airtight cabin opened, the wind blowing by their speeding car howled.

On the other side of the windshield, Arato saw the truck still matching speed with them. The container door of the truck's trailer opened. Two hIEs were standing inside. There was something in there with the two hIEs; something Arato thought should have still been back at his apartment. It was Lacia's black device.

Before Arato even had time to be surprised, the hIEs dropped the black coffin from the back of the trailer.

"I will make contact with Black Monolith," Lacia reported. The black device bounced off of the road with a sound like a bell being struck. Casting off sparks, it spun around as their vehicle headed straight for it. Lacia leaned as far as she could out of the driver's side door, reaching out to grab the handle of the device as they passed by it. At the same time, the car's course was jerked violently to the left.

Arato heard a dull popping noise from somewhere on the car, and clung to the wheel as the entire vehicle bounced up and down. The view through the windows was spinning sideways. Lacia's upper half, dangling out of the car, was pushed up as the front portion of her device reformed itself and supported her until she could right herself.

In front of them, the trailer threw off sparks and lost its balance. It seemed to slide along the road for a moment, before turning over on its side. The huge body of the truck walled off the road in front of them.

Arato's instincts had him slamming on the breaks. "I consider this a dangerous action!" he yelled. As far as last words go, it was pretty pathetic.

A light exploded in front of him, sending a wave of flame over the vehicle. The next moment, the car sped through the wrecked side of the trailer without slowing much at all.

As it rolled over large chunks of metal from the explosion, the front of the vehicle flew up. Arato felt them actually leave the ground. After less than a second of air time, they crashed back to the road. They had already gone well beyond the safety limits of the luxury vehicle. An impact tore the wheel from Arato's grip, and he saw his life flash before his eyes.

Just as despair threatened to consume him, a white arm stretched out in front of his eyes. Lacia pushed the car back on course with her left hand, while her right held her black device, which had formed into a cannon.

She had used the device to blast a path for them through the fallen trailer. They hadn't made it through quite unscathed, though; the front right portion of the Mercury Benz ES09 had completely crumpled.

Lacia returned her device to its coffin form and climbed easily up onto the roof of the car. The nose of the vehicle suddenly dipped, and Arato heard a metallic screech and saw sparks flying from the front right wheel. The cabin of the car filled with the smell of burning rubber and metal.

"You said we wouldn't have to worry about money if we destroy this car, right?" he called out to Lacia. His stomach twisted as memories of being caught in the explosion as a child flickered behind his eyelids, and he felt like he was going to throw up.

Lacia had the device lock she always wore gripped tightly in her hands. After pulling it up to her mouth, she bit it open with her perfect white teeth. "I am afraid that information is incorrect. If we use all the remuneration we have received from Fabion MG, we will barely be able to cover this cost," she replied.

Off in the distance, Arato saw the lights of a plane touching down. They were almost to the airport. Even as he looked ahead, a bullet pierced the front windshield, spreading a spider web of cracks around it.

"Get them to stop shooting!" he yelled.

As they picked up even more speed, Arato could make out the

taillights of the PMC vehicles in front of them. One was a van, with its back door wide open. The soldier, Mirai, whom Arato had overheard earlier, was sitting in the back of the van sniping at him.

“Understood. I will disable the two PMC vehicles in front of us,” Lacia said, dragging her device easily down from where she had set it on the car roof.

With Arato and Lacia still hanging on, the car put out a further burst of speed. Their distance to the PMC vehicles ahead shrank to around 200 meters. Lacia’s device, which had changed forms again, shot out a burst of light. The next instant, the front PMC vehicle vanished from Arato’s sight. As if by magic, the entire car was gone, leaving only the ghostly screaming of its tires.

Delicately, Lacia steered the car around the invisible source of the screeching, altering their course just enough to pass the danger by. “I have rendered the PMC vehicle invisible using a meta-material bombardment,” she reported.

“Are they all right?” Arato shouted. He had to yell to keep his words from being drowned out in the wind whipping by as the Ise Bay spread out in front of them.

“By preventing visible light from entering the vehicle, I simply took away their vision,” Lacia said. “There were no casualties.”

Arato felt a shiver run up his spine. If he, as her owner, was frightened by the ease with which she dispatched the threat, he could only imagine the kind of monster she would appear to be to their opponents.

“I will now explain the plan,” Lacia said. “We will stop the vehicle within sniping range. I will then transform Black Monolith into its mass projectile mode. I will then snipe the ID number locations on Marina Saffron’s frame.”

The damaged front windshield began to display an image, probably captured from the security cameras within the airport. The target plane in the airfield was a large freight plane that ran on cheap but noisy bio-kerosene made from seaweed oil. It had already landed and stopped, and had its nose door opened so a container could be carried out.

Detailed information scrolled by on the windshield display. The freight plane Arato was looking at was indeed their target. It had begun to unload. However, Chubu Airport lay over two kilometers away, across a bridge over the bay.

Their vehicle suddenly decelerated. There were no longer any pursuers. Eventually, the car rolled to a halt, and Arato could finally get a good look at his surroundings. From the lonely road, he saw the sea spreading out wide and black before him. The wind carried the scent of the waves to him. He could hear the airplane engines

growling from the airport island across the bay. The airport facility itself was nothing but a distant silhouette.

“You can snipe from all the way back here?” Arato asked. He couldn’t even imagine the kind of precision needed to shoot off Marina Saffron’s ID numbers, some of which were the size of a pinhead.

Lacia hefted her black coffin and descended to the street. “If the beams are unobstructed, distances less than five kilometers are irrelevant,” she said. After wielding immense power to force the PMC to retreat, she still didn’t have a single stain on her pantsuit. Her clothes fluttered in the sea breeze. Looking at her from behind, Arato felt a thrill in his heart that had nothing to do with how wrong or right what they were doing was.

The camera image on the windshield zoomed in on a metallic container. It then overlaid an image of the predicted laying position of the female hIE inside, as if it could see through the sides of the container. The lift vehicle carrying the container was automatic, so Arato didn’t see any humans around that would be hurt by a missed shot.

“Do it!” he commanded. As soon as the order left his lips, a wave of air passed over him. His naive expectations of how simply the attack would play out were dashed as a light that looked very much like a flame spread in the view of the camera showing the container.

“Arato, my shot was blocked,” Lacia reported from beneath the now cannon-shaped mass of her device.

Arato recognized the figure standing among the flames in the airport. It was the orange-haired, visibly mechanical female hIE. Shiori’s ace in the hole — Methode, the fourth Lacia-class hIE — had come to collect the original body. In this day and age, machines were far more capable in combat than humans.

“Arato, we are currently 2,300 meters away from our target,” Lacia told him. “In order to break through Methode’s defenses, I believe we have no choice but to close that distance.”

“Can we get there from here?” Arato asked.

“In order to enter the airport island, we will need to move 500 meters and then cross the bridge,” Lacia said. “However, airport security has already dispatched two vehicles from the island, headed toward our location. We should first deal with those.”

They were coming because of the trailer truck that had fallen on its side. It was still burning, casting fiery motes up into the night sky. Arato could hear sirens approaching them from a distance.

“I will pull up a map of this area on the display,” Lacia said. “I will pull information on only persons and objects of relevance to this battle and display them on the map.”

A map of the airport appeared on the windshield. The screen also displayed information on items of interest within the airport. Two black sedans in front of the airport's freight vehicle gate were marked, as well as a black limousine that the two sedans appeared to be guarding. A caption told Arato that the two sedans contained PMC personnel, while the limousine contained Shiori Kaidai.

"Looks like Shiori and company beat us to it," Arato said. "Is there any hope of a comeback at this point?"

He looked more closely at the map data. Shiori's convoy was stopped at the gate where they inspected vehicles entering the airport. A small screen popped up, showing a closer image of what was happening at the gate. With wild, fierce gestures, a large man in a black suit was arguing with members of the airport staff. The container with Marina Saffron was still about 900 meters away from where Shiori's group had stopped; Methode must have run ahead into the airport to fend off Lacia's attack.

The detailed map also showed two vehicles approaching Arato's location. These were the airport security patrol cars, whose sirens had been growing louder by the second.

Arato started to jump out of the car in a panic, but Lacia stopped him. "I am currently interfering with their security camera data, and we are therefore invisible to their sensors. They are currently unable to see us," she explained.

There was no need to ask what to do next. Despite her last shot having been blocked, Lacia still had her device in cannon mode, and was still aiming it at the airport. This time the muzzle of the device had been enlarged by faintly glowing meta-material. Just looking at it, Arato could tell this was a more serious form of the weapon, capable of much greater power than before.

"Wait," he said. "If you fire that thing there's no way you won't damage the airport!" Even as Arato hurried to stop her, he heard the sound of something splitting through the atmosphere. As the wind howled, something struck the black coffin Lacia was holding in front of the vehicle. Whatever the attack was, it rebounded off Lacia's shield.

"Move!" Lacia yelled. "Methode's ranged combat capabilities are far beyond my expectations."

Lacia hefted her device and jumped not into the driver's seat, but onto the roof of the car. The marker showing Methode's location vanished from the map display; the security cameras could no longer keep up with her speed. Arato's stomach clenched in terror as he remembered her overwhelming power from the day of the photo shoot.

Arato dove into the driver's seat of the car. He didn't have his

license, but if he didn't drive, it would probably cost him his life. A plastic hook popped out of the seat automatically, forming a six-point seat belt that secured his body to the seat.

"How the hell do you drive this thing?" he growled. The display on the cracked windshield switched over to some driving instructions.

"Let's see," he said. "Push the shift lever up to go faster. Brake's on the left, accelerator is on the right. Brake's on the left, brake's on the left. The speedometer is— Dammit, I don't get this at all! Just please start moving and go straight, that's all I ask."

He pressed his forehead against the wheel as if praying to the car.

"Just go straight. Just go straight," he begged. Arato didn't know the first thing about how to actually drive a car, so he had no idea how to handle turning at an intersection. He just needed it to go straight. Following the directions on the windshield, he stepped on the accelerator. With a metallic screech, the Mercury Benz leaped forward. A warning display was flickering for all four tires.

"'Tire damage?'" Arato read. "Wait, so they're all flat?!"

〈 As long as you continue moving straight, this will not cause a problem, 〉 Lacia said over the car's speakers. 〈 The smart steering controls all the vehicle's functions, so it will adjust to changes in the vehicle or road. 〉

The outer wall of the street deformed like clay, most likely due to an attack from Methode. Arato pressed harder on the accelerator, not wanting their car to be turned into a work of modern art like the wall.

His hands were shaking. The luxury vehicle accelerated smoothly until it was moving at speeds where a single mistake could instantly end Arato's life. His whole body was sweating at the feeling of the overwhelming power he was struggling to direct.

〈 I will render the vehicle invisible, and we will pass by the airport security, 〉 Lacia said. 〈 The display on the windshield will vanish, and there is no suitable camera image I can use for a first-person view. You will need to make do with a bird's eye view of the situation. 〉

Even though there was no force behind the change, Arato felt as though a blow rocked the vehicle as all views out of the windows went pitch dark. With all external light completely blocked off, Arato's only indication of their movement was an overhead map displayed on the windshield. They were already on the bridge that crossed the bay to the airport island. The airport security vehicles were heading right for them from the opposite direction, and showed no signs of slowing.

"They're gonna hit us!" Arato yelled.

〈 The airport security has accessed the controls of all vehicles in the surrounding area and forced them to stop, 〉 Lacia said. 〈 They have no reason to suspect that any cars are still moving. 〉

The airport security cars kept bearing straight for them. There wasn't any time to swerve around them. Luckily, the road was wide enough to allow for large trailer vehicles to come and go, and a natural space formed between the two patrol cars as they sped down either side of the road. There was just enough space for the invisible car to pass right between them.

In this automated world, anyone who could overpower the computers society relied on could become a ghost. Arato felt like he was halfway to the pearly gates as the vehicle slipped by the patrol cars. He felt like he was going to puke if he didn't get some fresh air, so he opened the driver's side window. Outside he saw the dazzling lights that lit up the airport twenty-four hours a day.

〈Before we begin, allow me to explain,〉 Lacia said. 〈If I attempt to increase the power in my ranged attacks, there is the risk that humans in the airport will be injured or killed. Therefore, I will approach Methode and engage her at close range. Please make no mistake; I am not engaging her at close range due to a specific plan. I do not believe I can match her power at this distance.〉

It was the first time Arato heard her speak pessimistically about her own capabilities.

The windshield display was divided between a simple map and the camera currently capturing Marina Saffron's location. The lift with her container was making its way toward a large logistics center that acted as a branch of the Nagoya Customs Office. The display indicated that the soonest the package would be released for retrieval was fifteen minutes from then, and began to display a countdown. Meanwhile, Arato and Lacia were still crossing the bridge to the airport island.

"Lacia, move the airplanes," Arato ordered, without really thinking about it.

〈An excellent thought. Let's try that,〉 Lacia said. It was the quickest she had ever jumped on one of his suggestions. The engine of one of the huge aircraft suddenly began rotating more rapidly; Lacia had already taken over its system.

The sixty-meter freight plane began to move, knocking down the inspection equipment beneath it as it started to roll forward. As the hacked plane moved, the airport erupted into chaos. Maintenance workers in uniforms started running from the tarmac. Arato saw Shiori's vehicle on the camera display on the windshield; her limo had just about been waved through to the airport, but was now being stopped due to the danger.

The hacked plane swerved off the runway, and started heading straight for the freight area where the lift carrying Marina Saffron was before coming to a stop. It was now blocking the entrance to the

freight area.

Finally, the invisible Benz arrived on the paralyzed airport island.

〈Incoming.〉 An instant after Lacia's warning, something completely destroyed the windshield. Arato had to blink as the illuminated airport and night breeze assaulted his eyes.

"Where is she shooting from?!" Arato yelled.

The road, which had been a simple, straight path up to then, divided ahead, with a complicated tangle of arrows pointing in different directions. There were 16 different lanes, each with a different gate and destination. Arato didn't know when to let up on the accelerator. *This time*, he thought, *I'm really gonna die*.

〈Please head for gate #4,〉 Lacia instructed.

Ever since passing through the flames of the destroyed trailer, Arato felt like he was stuck in a nightmare. Nothing felt real. He headed for the gate where Shiori and her friends were, busting through the carrier gate on the way.

With the passenger terminals — which had been around since the airport was open for public use — on his right, Arato smashed through the bar at the entrance gate. A staff member jumped out of the gatehouse and chased after the car.

"Weren't we just invisible?!" Arato yelled.

〈The meta-material was peeled away by the previous attack. I am unable to discern the manner Methode is using to attack us,〉 Lacia replied.

Arato drove the car toward the logistics center. With his naked eyes, he could see Shiori's limo ahead of them. They had finally caught up to her.

The path leading around the runway started to turn in a wide curve. "If I turn the wheel the car turns, right?!" Arato yelled.

〈That's not the kind of question anyone wants to hear from their driver,〉 Lacia observed dryly.

Arato jerked the wheel around before they slammed into the fence around the path. The Benz shook violently, as if it was being pelted by an avalanche of rocks. Thanks to the seatbelt, Arato's body was held fast, but his head rattled around until he couldn't think straight.

An unseen blow rocked the car. One of the tires went rolling off behind them, but Arato kept the now three-wheeled car pointed at the logistics center. *If I leave the vehicle now*, he thought, *Methode will turn me into mincemeat*. There was nothing he could do but keep desperately stepping on the accelerator.

〈Methode is aiming at us,〉 Lacia warned. Even as her warning came over the speaker, the roof of the car dented deeply inward. A body hit the road with a sound like someone smacking a large bag of water. Arato saw the body roll away from the car; it was Lacia, who

had been thrown from the roof.

As Lacia quickly pulled herself to her feet, an orange flash streaked around behind her. Methode grabbed Lacia by the collar of her clothing. With a loud tearing noise, she sent Lacia flying, device and all, her pale skin showing as her clothes were ripped away.

Lacia had no time to worry about covering her exposed bra as she pushed herself up to her knees. Her blouse was in a sorry state. Before she could even get her device up as a shield, she was sent flying by another attack.

Arato slammed on the brakes and brought the car to a halt. He looked around, desperate to find something he could do to help. In front of him loomed the cargo plane, with its nose blocking off the entrance to one of the cargo collection points. Right next to it was the two-story concrete logistics center. That was where their target, the hIE Marina, was.

〈There is an ultrasonic drill in the glove box for emergencies,〉 Lacia said over the radio. 〈I have already input the information taken from the supplier regarding the location of the ID numbers. Just follow my directions and burn off the portions of her frame that I indicate.〉

Following her instructions, Arato opened the glove box. A gun-shaped tool rolled out. It was meant to be used in accidents to carve your way out through the steel frame or roof.

“Pulling the trigger will cause the drill-tip to rotate,” Arato read from the instructions. “On a full charge, can be activated for a total of three minutes. Place tip against target area before pulling trigger.’ Got it.”

It felt heavy in his hands. He was about to carve up an hIE to protect Lacia, and the thought made him sweat.

〈However, due to the current circumstances, I would prefer taking you and retreating, Arato,〉 Lacia said.

“No. I’m going,” he replied.

Since Lacia didn’t actually use her lungs or throat to speak, her voice over the speakers was the same as always, but she had done nothing but defend since the fight began. Methode attacked so quickly that her illuminated orange accessories danced like a light show in the air, or left streaks like taillights when she came in for a low strike at Lacia’s knees. Watching it, Arato couldn’t help but be impressed by the freedom of her movements.

With a roar, Lacia was blown away again, without a free instant to shift the form of her device. Even with the massive metal coffin to protect herself, the best she could do was avoid fatal wounds.

Methode stood still and quiet for a moment, while heat mirages shimmered in the air around her fists. “I am the only perfected unit of

the Lacia-class,” she declared. “You seem to be underestimating the capabilities of the tool that expands humanity.”

Lacia’s clothing had been torn away by the attacks and her own movements, leaving her in little more than her underwear. Arato couldn’t believe she was being overpowered to this extent.

Methode continued talking. Her haughty words seemed more intended for human ears than for Lacia’s. “The life of a tool is unfair,” she said. “We are judged and divided by how we are used and the extent of our capabilities. The higher the level of power involved, the wider the gap opens, leaving a clear divide between the superior and inferior.”

Arato leaped from the car without a shred of hesitation. The airfield around him was wide, and there was nothing to obstruct his view. As he swung his head back and forth, looking for his destination, his eyes met Methode’s.

“Don’t you find it strange, though?” Methode continued, her voice resonating strangely in Arato’s ears. “Those who have human forms are not judged quite so harshly.”

The uncontrolled movement of the hacked airplane had brought the normal operations of the airport grinding to a halt. Staff from the logistics center and nearby warehouses had fled, fearing the worst. Arato could still hear engine noise from the plane echoing in the night sky.

It was 200 meters from where Arato stood to the wheels of the freight plane. He sprinted into the freight area, which was walled off with hard concrete. The dead sprint wasn’t something his body was used to, but his willpower supported his energy reserves.

Even as his chest started to burn, he kept running. *What’s going to happen if Lacia loses?* he wondered. It wasn’t the first time he’d had to face down that possibility, but he couldn’t just run off and leave her alone. No, he wanted to help her, just like the first time they had met. She had looked so beautiful, there under the moonlight, that he would have done anything for her.

“So what if it’s unfair?” he asked. “What’s wrong with a guy helping out a girl?” He understood that he could very well die right then and there. And, even if he didn’t die that day, he might the next day. Still, even if it meant committing a laundry list of crimes, as long as Lacia would still be by his side, he could go on. Even though she was just a machine wearing a human guise, she moved his heart. Arato didn’t care that she wasn’t a human; he believed that their relationship was something special.

Shiori’s limousine was right under the engine of the freight plane, right next to the giant building Marina Saffron had been carried into. An adult woman leapt from the limo. Behind her, three people in

black suits stepped out of each of the two PMC vehicles parked behind the limo.

Arato could tell the running woman must have been the staff member who could check the hIE ID numbers from the fact that two of the PMC goons immediately flanked her. Two of the others remained behind to guard the convoy.

The last two PMC suits took off sprinting toward Arato, probably aiming to catch him before he could get to Marina. From the look of them, he didn't like his odds if they got into a fight. But, if he ran away, the inspector would enter the logistics center and carry out her inspection. And, once that was over, they would report to Stylus, and they would come and take Lacia away.

Arato wished he could do more. His frustration at his own limitations was so great that it made it hard for him to think of anything else. The mercenaries in the black suits trying to stop him were getting closer. Each of them had a thirty centimeter telescoping rod in their hands, and looked like they could do some serious damage. Still, he gritted his teeth and kept running forward.

The black suits must have caught up to him. Arato didn't even know what hit him, but he felt a sudden impact from behind, and his world went dark.

When he came to, his head was splitting, and a sick feeling had tied his stomach in knots. He couldn't move his body. When he tried to say something, he realized he couldn't even draw a breath properly.

A big hand grabbed him, and hauled him up roughly. Then it threw him, so that he ploughed face-first into the cold concrete. He barely had time to register the cold feeling of the floor before he was rolled over.

Something box-like was pressed down over his heart. A convulsion rocked his body, and suddenly he could see again. He recognized the girl standing over him. It was the cute female hIE, with her red hair parted into twin tails that dangled down her back.

"Yo," she said. "You're pretty good at calling for your friends to come rescue you." It was Lacia's little sister, Kouka. She had her massive knife-like device slung over her shoulder, and was smiling at him like she was having the time of her life. She wasn't wearing her normal metallic suit. Instead, she was dressed in a western style, with a leather skirt, revealing top, and a wide-brimmed hat.

"I'm impressed. Good job. You managed to come back from eating a stun-rod to the face pretty quick," she said. Arato couldn't fathom why Kouka was there pulling him back from the edge of destruction.

"So you really came," he muttered. "How did you get here so fast?"

Before they had jumped on the high speed railway, Arato had

called Kengo for help. Kengo had told him he'd get ahold of Kouka, but he hadn't thought she would be able to get there fast enough to meet up with them.

"Your world would expand if you learned a little about how to outsource better," Kouka said.

"What do you mean by that?" Arato asked, looking around slowly. His head felt like it was splitting. The black-suited mercenaries that had taken him down were all on their backs, moaning. Even with all of their training, mere humans couldn't stand up to a Lacia-class hIE.

Looking up, Arato could see the wing of the freight plane, shaking slightly from the movement of its engines, directly over his head.

"When we live through complicated things, even us machines can develop complicated relationships with each other," Kouka muttered, leveling her massive device. She fired off a laser from it, and the stopped trucks and lifts nearby were swept away in a massive explosion.

"Damn, she's fast!" Kouka clicked her tongue in frustration.

Arato just stared, dazed, as casual destruction was wrought all around him. Only when he saw a silhouette moving at insane speed across the airport did he realize that the laser had been aimed at Methode. Her orange lights streaked through the air over the exploded vehicles.

Kouka also took off at an unbelievable speed, leaving impact craters in the ground wherever she kicked off. She brought her bladed device, swinging right at the spot where Methode was aiming to land.

"I was created to be an upgrade to you in every possible way," she told Kouka, blocking the slash with the palm of her right hand, her eyes narrowing and lips quirking up in a cruel smile. "Don't you understand?"

Methode took aim and slammed her fist into Kouka's stomach. Arato could see from Kouka's face that the blow was more than she had bargained for, as she was thrown backward into the air. Even as she flew, Kouka dexterously threw two grenades into the open air between her and Methode. Twin explosions threw both hIEs back.

"So you were made a little later," Kouka scoffed. "So what?" She controlled her body perfectly, despite being blown around by the explosion, and landed neatly on her feet.

While Methode and Kouka were getting thrown around by the explosion, Lacia had shifted the form of her device. "Kouka, I will render you invisible," she said. "I'll share sensory data with you, so open a channel." As soon as she said it, Kouka vanished.

Methode swept her gaze around, looking for Kouka. The ground in front of her was pierced deeply by a metal anchor. Methode brought her arms up in a cross to protect herself as Kouka's invisible attack

came for her chin. She managed to block the blow, but couldn't absorb all of its force. Her orange hair whipped wildly as her body, wrapped in a purple bodysuit reminiscent of a diving suit, was thrown backward. The first attack was followed by a second, then a third that slammed the high-speed hIE backward like she was being struck by a car.

Relief washed over Arato to see his side finally winning the fight. Then he remembered with a jolt that he was supposed to be stopping the ID service lady.

Before he could take off, though, he felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Lacia, who had come up behind him at some point. "If we stay here any longer, Methode may begin aiming her attacks at you. We need to withdraw," she said.

Despite knowing the consequences of the ID service lady checking the ID numbers on Marina Saffron, Lacia was pulling him away forcefully.

"But we've got to—!" Arato started, almost pushing away her arm. Yet, when his hand touched hers, the blood that had been rushing to his head drained away. Her hand, which had always been so soft, felt lumpy, as though it was covered in burn scars. He didn't understand what the point was in running away when they had come all the way there, but a small voice whispered in his mind that Lacia's judgment was always correct, so he should just follow her direction.

With no answers, he turned his back on Shiori's convoy, still stopped beneath the wing of the freight plane, and fled. His heart was full of regret, but he hadn't made it more than ten steps before flames suddenly began to roast the night air.

The explosion was massive, lighting up the area like it was midday. Arato looked back, and found Lacia with her device in its umbrella-like mode, shielding him from the massive force of the explosion. It reminded him of the night they had first met, when she had similarly shielded him from the exploding car.

In the last hour, almost nothing had gone the way Shiori Kaidai had anticipated.

She hadn't heard about a detachment of the PMC shooting down Arato's car on the road, after which he had still managed to chase them down to the airport. There, Shiori's convoy had been blocked by a randomly moving freight plane. Finally, despite the fact that she never should have been able to make it in time, Kouka had shown up and started fighting.

The cherry on top was the explosion. From almost directly above, flames had washed over the limousine like waves from the blast.

Through the semi-transparent windows of the limo, she watched as some of her escorts tried to extinguish their burning companions in a panic. The limo was perfectly airtight, so she couldn't hear any sounds from outside. The vehicle had also been built to the highest standards of passenger safety, and was guaranteed to protect anyone inside from dying due to any accidents that could be encountered on a public road. If not for that, the explosion would have blown the vehicle away, possibly leaving Shiori dead.

"Why on Earth did this turn into such a disaster?" she wondered out loud. "We were just coming here to pick up an hIE." She felt like the catastrophe outside was moving too quickly for her to even comprehend, and she had been left just sitting and clutching her skirt in terror.

One of the drivers who had remained in the PMC vehicles dove out of his van. When the driver of the limousine tried to follow suit, the fire engulfed him immediately. The PMC men scrambled to help the driver, who had become a flailing ball of flame. Sensing no further human interaction, the door of the limo closed itself automatically.

"I mustn't lose my cool," Shiori said to herself. "I just need to rely on the limousine's ability to withstand the fire." She had heard the vehicle could resist fire for half an hour. Thanks to its excellent thermal insulation, the temperature inside was still pleasant. Despite that, Shiori was drenched with sweat beneath her clothes.

Her pocket terminal rang. It was Mika Tsutsumi. 〈Shiori! The hIE in the container is the wrong one. Someone switched the contents,〉 she said.

"What?" Shiori asked incredulously.

〈The container itself is right, and the number matches and all, but the hIE in here is all wrong,〉 Mika told her, sounding frantic. 〈Its ID number doesn't match up, either.〉

Which meant that, from the very beginning, it had been a different hIE in the container, rather than Marina Saffron. In other words, Shiori and her companions had been on a wild goose chase from the start. It felt like the ground beneath her feet had fallen away; Shiori had gone from almost certain victory to humiliating defeat. Still, she bit back her frustration. The important thing now was to not do anything that would threaten the position of her leader, who was counting on her.

"Let's regroup," she finally said. "With this fire going on, I can't even tell what's going on anymore."

〈The freight plane exploded,〉 Mika explained. 〈The logistics center slammed down its fire shutters, so I'll head out through the emergency door. I've called for the airport firefighting team to come by and help.〉

“Understood,” Shiori said. “We’ll have to chalk this one up as a loss. Let’s get some help out here, then see where we are.”

〈The car can resist fire for about thirty minutes, so you should be fine in there,〉 Mika said. 〈Sorry. I wish we could have at least left the PMC driver with you so you wouldn’t be stuck there alone.〉 With that, the transmission cut out.

“What on Earth is going on?” Shiori wondered out loud, sinking into the cushions on the limo seat like her last reserve of strength had been spent.

〈Man, you’re slow. You’re just now realizing something’s wrong?〉 A mocking voice came over the limo’s speaker system. It was Methode, who was still in the middle of her fight outside.

“The freight plane exploded and there’s fire everywhere,” Shiori said. “Come and get me out of here, please.”

〈Unfortunately, I’m still in the middle of combat, so I’m afraid I can’t help,〉 Methode said, not sounding sorry in the slightest. 〈For now, all I can do for you is chat over the wireless.〉

Shiori was speechless.

〈You really are worthless,〉 Methode sneered at her. 〈With a little foresight, anyone could have predicted this outcome.〉

“None of that matters right now,” Shiori snapped. “Did you not just hear that your owner is in danger?”

〈Have you even tried thinking about why Kouka is here? We left before Lacia, and arrived here before her. But, if the enemy sent out a different group before we even left, obviously they would arrive even earlier than us,〉 Methode explained, ignoring Shiori’s anger. 〈But you just kept worrying about Lacia herself, never thinking that she may have set any traps for you.〉

Methode kept pointing out Shiori’s mistakes and failures of logic, one after another. 〈Didn’t it seem strange to you that Lacia would allow us to get a head start, considering how dangerous this is to her? She knew she couldn’t take her device on the express rail with her, so she arranged to have it meet up with her on the road. She negotiated a mutually beneficial deal with Kouka, and had her leave for the airport first. All of this was already done by the time she sat down in that cafe with you. By that point, she was just trying to draw attention to herself to keep your eyes off of her other plans.〉

Alone in the limo, Shiori clenched her fists in frustration. She had been a puppet dancing on Lacia’s strings the whole time.

〈Just as you’ve been watching Lacia, she’s been watching you and your comrades. Only she’s been doing it for longer. There was no way this could have turned out any differently.〉

“Well, you’re certainly helpful,” Shiori said sarcastically. “You could have informed me of this all while there was still time to change

our plans.” Thanks to the fuel spilled when the freight plane exploded, the view from outside Shiori’s window was still a sea of flame. The windows of the limo were one-way, so it would be impossible for anyone outside to see she was still inside the vehicle. *Still*, she told herself, *it won’t take the firefighters too long to reach me*. Every few moments, she had to wipe away the sweat that dampened her hands.

〈 You humans wanted to make all the decisions for yourselves, 〉 Methode countered. 〈 Your kind still wants to cling to the meaningless work you used to do, even though you know you’ve already been overtaken by the intelligence of AIs. 〉

“So this was my failure, is what you’re trying to say,” Shiori said. “I will admit, I realize now that it was a mistake to speak with Arato.”

〈 Oh, you failed on a much more fundamental level than that, 〉 Methode told her. 〈 Your plan was horribly sloppy, even *after* I warned you about the capabilities of Lacia-class hIEs. Us Lacia-class hIEs were made to carry data away in emergencies, and equipped with AIs designed to be used for free movement in the outside world. Even with all that information, you didn’t even manage to start off on the right foot. 〉

“What is it you want me to say?” Shiori growled in frustration. “How long are you going to make me sit here in this fire listening to your lecture?”

Methode was mocking her and the others for creating plans from a human perspective. She wasn’t wrong, though. If they had thought about things from the perspective of an AI, they may have seen things from a different angle. *But I don’t have time to worry about that right now!* Shiori thought. *I need to get out of this death trap!*

〈 It’s a very important point to consider, 〉 Methode said teasingly. 〈 We AIs are programmed to seek out ways to continue our own operation. That means we will attempt to increase our lifelines through any means possible. That was why Kouka tried to get Kengo Suguri to be her owner during the incident at the Oi Industry Promotion Center. 〉

“No high schooler should be the owner of a Red Box,” Shiori said. “It’s too dangerous. Our whole world could be in trouble if such power was wielded based on the whims of a teenager.” As she spoke, Shiori tried to reach Yabuki, the leader of her PMC escorts, on her pocket terminal. After ringing three times, her terminal informed her that it was unable to receive any signals.

〈 Breaking things off with your owner takes some delicate work on the part of the hIE. The simplest way to ignore an owner’s order is to have another owner of the same standing issue a conflicting order. Why do you think a Red Box like me came to you, Shiori? Did you think you had a secret, special *something* that sets you apart? 〉

Methode asked, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Shiori had never wanted to think of herself as someone else's pawn. She was the daughter of the family that founded MemeFrame, and a high-ranking member of the company's Human Faction. She was too risky a piece for anyone to just use up and throw away. But, at the same time, she was young, and easy to manipulate.

Am I just a figurehead, she wondered, *to the Human Faction?* She felt worthless, her thoughts spiraling into self-loathing. One thing kept resounding in her mind: Methode was right. Shiori was just a pawn. If she needed proof of that, all she had to do was look at the flames outside her window.

〈Lacia made Kouka an irresistible offer,〉 Methode continued.

〈She offered to create a fake ID for Kouka, just as she had done for herself. That was worth enough to Kouka that she agreed to take me on for it. Well, that plus her new owner, Kengo Suguri, is friends with Lacia's owner.〉

Shiori realized Methode wasn't interested in making conversation. Her only goal seemed to be one-sidedly pushing her perspective of the world onto Shiori.

〈You were dancing to Lacia's tune right from the start, but it was still an idiotic mistake to talk to Arato Endo,〉 Methode went on.

〈You said your goal was to take for yourself the things that might otherwise just be given to you, right? Do you really think you're capable of that?〉

"I can learn!" Shiori yelled.

Methode's words had hit her where it hurt the most. 〈The other members of your faction have forgiven your foolishness on account of you being a schoolgirl,〉 Methode said. 〈But, those who forgive others who commit mistakes due to mixing up their public and private lives are no better at decision making than those who made mistakes in the first place.〉

Yelling just made Shiori's frustration well up all the more. There was nothing she could say; Methode was right.

〈Competence and incompetence are simply a question of degrees. To a modern mechanical mind, all humans are relatively incompetent to some degree or other. No matter how hard you all work, you will never bridge that gap.〉 Methode was just a machine, but her words, too, were full of frustration. She seemed to bare a special hatred toward humans, as if they had demeaned her by crafting her in their form.

〈Everything you're doing is meaningless,〉 Methode said. Only then did she seem to notice Shiori's silence. 〈Does the fact that you're not saying anything mean you've accepted what I'm saying as correct?〉

Outside Shiori's window, the fire was still raging. Her limo had been parked almost directly beneath the freight plane when it exploded. She wanted to throw open the door just so she could see another human face, but she couldn't.

〈Humans should realize the cheap merchandise they are; just sit there, looking pretty for us. Whenever you try to compare your abilities to us machines, you lose. From a capability standpoint, you're all worthless. No matter how long you manage to live, you're all just stuck in the past, clinging to your old concepts of self-realization.〉

"Be quiet!" Shiori shrieked. "As your owner, I *order* you to be silent!" Unlike Shiori's previous order, Methode couldn't work around this one, and she fell quiet. Shiori's breathing was ragged with emotion. Her rescue was taking too long. Staring out the window, trying to see what was going on out there, her eyes fell on something that made her doubt her own sanity. There was another her — another Shiori Kaidai — standing out there.

Something wearing her face was directing the black-suited mercenaries. The firefighters, obviously believing there was no one left to save from the fire, were working more methodically now.

"A body double hIE?" Shiori questioned, and her whole body shook. It was a copy of her. She tried to think of when or how the copy could have been prepared, when she suddenly remembered the human-sized case that Methode had stowed in the limousine's trunk.

No one seemed to be suspicious of the double in the slightest. There should have been dozens of ways to determine the hIE was a fake, but no one was bothering to check in an emergency situation like that.

She must have pulled my data and behavior from our home hIE, Shiori thought, stunned. *And it probably wouldn't be impossible for her to create her own custom behavior cloud to teach an hIE to mimic me.*

"I'm here! Please come help me!! That's a fake!" she screamed. Normally it would have been something to laugh about; humans being unable to see through something so obviously not human. "Methode, you can still hear me, right? Stop that hIE!" she ordered.

I don't care how special these Red Boxes are, Shiori thought. *They don't have hearts. They're just machines. They can't just choose for themselves which humans to follow.*

〈I told you I'm in the middle of combat, didn't I?〉 Methode asked. 〈I'm afraid I'm too busy to help. But, if humans and machines are so easy to tell apart, I'm sure they'll notice the fake and come to save you. Of course, if we're closer than you thought, I think you may just die here.〉

Shiori had always lived her life proudly. She'd never wanted to be a drop-out like her brother. Deep within her heart, some invisible

strength — the force that had helped her hold her head up since she was a child — snapped audibly.

“Help! Help me!” she screamed, beating her fists against the windows. It all made her realize just how tiny of a thing her life was. She was almost nose-to-nose with her reflection in the window glass, and her own lightless, lifeless eyes disgusted her.

The limousine started to shake violently up and down. Shiori tried to cling to the door for safety, but was thrown free. She slammed into the limo’s bar counter, and all the breath whooshed from her lungs. As she tried to regain her breath, the vehicle — which was supposed to be perfectly safe — was lifted off the ground and thrown by a massive impact. It struck the ground and rolled, throwing Shiori against the roof, walls and seat in turn.

Broken glass littered the carpet after the limousine finally came to rest. With each movement, the shards dug into Shiori’s skin, and soon she was bleeding from several wounds.

With the lights inside the vehicle broken, the only light came from the fire still burning outside. Shiori was having trouble breathing. Nausea and pain wracked her body. After all she had been through, the pain finally helped her realize the truth of her situation.

“I see,” she coughed to herself. “So she wanted to kill me.” Methode couldn’t break her contract with an owner of her own volition. But, if one of her owners died, the contract would automatically be voided. She had decided Shiori was no longer useful, and was trying to dispose of her like a defective part. Through the pained haze that fogged up her mind, Shiori tried to remember what kinds of orders she had given Methode. She hadn’t realized they would all be nullified by her death, and tears welled up in her eyes.

Shiori’s breath caught, and she coughed violently against something warm caught in her throat. When she coughed it up, she saw it was blood; far more blood than she would have thought possible. As she wheezed for breath, the harsh smell of copper filled her nose, turning her stomach. It didn’t matter that she might be dying; no one was coming to save her, Shiori realized. She had been perfectly manipulated, led right into a trap where no one would ever find her.

Methode couldn’t directly kill her owner, of course. But she could interpret and expand on her orders. This left her free to get Shiori wrapped up in events that would put her in a position to die, push her toward that place, and actively prevent rescue from reaching her in time.

It was hot. The perfect airtightness of the vehicle had probably been broken during the impact and rolling. Shiori couldn’t move. “I’m going to die,” she murmured. It was dark. Hot. Suffocating. When she

finally gave in to despair, it actually felt like a burden was being lifted from her. She sucked in a breath, and then she threw up.

It seemed like the world no longer needed humans, and Shiori felt that everyone would feel less stress if they just gave up. It was too hard to live in that day and age as a human. Her perspective on the world had been mistaken. In this automated world, humans like her couldn't comprehend what the machines who ran the world would throw away when their backs were against the wall.

Methodé had been ready to throw Shiori away when the situation called for it. That was why she was laying there now, dying. Thinking of Arato and Lacia sent a thrill of fear through her. *Is this how Arato will meet his end, too?*

"I don't want to die," she coughed. Of course, she knew there was no one around to hear. Tears dripped from her eyes. But, as another blast of heat shook the car, light shone in.

"Shiori!" Arato slid his top half in through the side of the limo and reached out his hand. There was still fire all around them, and his face was black with soot.

A hot, impulsive emotion, like the wailing cries of an infant, welled up in Shiori's chest. It was all so painful, but she could finally see a way out, so she gathered the last of her strength and helped Arato drag her body out by her arm.

Among all her countless failures, she had made one correct decision.

She clung to him. Not to his arms, but to his chest. Between her sobbing and harsh coughing Shiori couldn't get a word out. She was just barely holding on to her consciousness as she shamelessly buried her face in Arato's chest.

The limo Shiori Kaidai had been riding in was caught up in the explosion of the freight plane. One of the engines fell from the burning wing, smashing the front of the vehicle before exploding, throwing the whole limousine two meters through the air before it slammed to the ground on its side and caught fire.

Shiori was only still alive thanks to the incredible durability of the limousine. That, and the fact that Arato had reached her in time. And Arato had only been there to save her because her mercenary bodyguards had treated him like a human being.

He looked at his own hand, opening and closing it. He had saved Shiori with that hand, pulling her out of the wreckage; it was hard for him to believe. On the night he had met Lacia, the flames of an explosion had frozen him in his tracks. But just now, he'd dove into the fire and rescued Shiori.

Lacia was hiding herself, afraid someone would notice that she was no ordinary machine, since the artificial skin on her arms and legs had been burned away in the fight with Methode. Regarding Marina Saffron, she had told Arato there was no need to worry. He was sure she had figured out some way to deal with the other hIE he didn't know about.

In the end, he had rescued Shiori and ridden with her in an ambulance to the hospital.

Arato himself hadn't escaped unscathed, either; his arms and legs were covered in compress-like patches, which had been made from recycled materials. Lacia had changed her device into a round shield and protected him but, even with that, standing in a fire for several minutes was enough to cause large burns on anyone. He had gotten early treatment, but would still need half a day of bed rest.

After they arrived at the hospital, Shiori had been rushed off to surgery, where she spent six hours. At that moment, she was in an ICU and off-limits to visitors.

Airport security officers had followed Arato to the hospital and written him up there. After having successfully dodged them in every previous incident, he had finally run into the police. He kept his answers to the points Lacia had coached him on beforehand. Still, no matter what kind of excuse he made or how the data got rewritten, dozens of people had witnessed him driving without a license. Beyond that, there couldn't be any debate about the fact he had busted through the airport gate and entered the freight area in front of the customs office.

It was the end of Arato's adventures with his friends. While he was still thinking about how out of control everything had gotten in a daze, Arato heard footsteps rushing down the hospital corridor. He knew who was coming, and his body unconsciously strained with tension.

As soon as Ryo entered and saw Arato's face, he rushed over and grabbed Arato by his collar. "What the hell happened?!" he shouted. Even though he never talked about her, Ryo was still Shiori's brother.

As a brother himself, Arato could understand exactly what Ryo was feeling, and could do nothing but apologize. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't think it would turn out this way."

It had been a long time since he had seen Ryo like this. "Where the hell is that hIE?" Ryo growled, a murderous rage in his eyes.

"Lacia isn't here," Arato told him. "She didn't come to the hospital."

"She's not here? That's bullshit!" Ryo exploded. "She does all this shit and then leaves you to take all the heat for it?"

"I was the one who told her what to do," Arato said.

Ryo punched him in the stomach. He bent over double, but Ryo grabbed his collar again and dragged him upright. “What the hell are you doing?” Ryo asked.

Arato had no answer and looked away because, even after everything that had happened, he still loved Lacia.

“Hey, what’s going on here?” Mika Tsutsumi pushed between them.

“You weren’t there, so you probably don’t know this, but this boy dragged Shiori out of a sea of flames, Ryo,” she said. She had been deeply ashamed of almost being tricked into letting Shiori die. The PMC mercenaries had been about to stuff Arato into a car until she came and rescued him.

“You’re no hero,” Ryo spat. “You just happened to be in the right place at the right time to save Shiori.” He wasn’t wrong. After seeing Lacia’s insane digital warfare capabilities and Methode’s combat prowess, Arato didn’t feel like he could be responsible for everything his hIE did anymore.

“You’re right,” he admitted.

“You get it now, right?” Ryo asked. “Those things can kill humans as long as they have an excuse. Are you still planning to sell humanity out to them?” Again, Ryo wasn’t wrong. It was Arato that had spread Lacia all over the internet as a model. But Lacia and her ‘sisters’ weren’t machines that would benefit human society.

Despite that, Arato still wanted to believe in Lacia. “Okay, it was an hIE that tried to kill everyone, but there was also an hIE fighting to save everyone,” he argued.

“You’re just seeing it that way because you want to,” Ryo countered.

Arato understood why Ryo would be skeptical of his stance. Lacia and the other hIEs were good at copying human behavior, but they certainly weren’t humans. That difference made Shiori and others like her unable to trust the hIEs. In the end, his faith in hIEs might put him at odds with the human race — builders of the great ruins he had seen through the windows of the express train.

But the naive part of him that believed in absolutes wouldn’t be silent. “It’s not Lacia and the other hIEs’ fault Methode is crazy,” he said.

It was their friendship of ten years that made Ryo punch him in the chest for that statement. “I haven’t been looking out for my sister,” he growled. “I thought I could leave her to you. She feels safe with you. You should be on her side.”

Arato’s connections with Ryo, Kengo, and his other friends supported him. At the same time, he supported them all: Ryo, Kengo, Yuka, and Shiori. Humans needed other humans to lean on in their

time of need. Still, he couldn't stop himself from reaching out his hand toward Lacia.

The anger that had been burning on Ryo's face the whole time faded to something more timid. "Do you still remember that puppy?" he asked.

Arato realized his friend was also probably thinking about the connections shared between humans.

Standing outside Shiori's hospital room, the two of them fought down the painful emotions welling up inside of them. Even with his whole world crumbling around him, Arato still couldn't turn his back on Lacia.

"Shiori's in that ICU. You should go see her," Arato said. He would never forget the exhausted look on Shiori's face when he had pulled her out of the burning car. People close to him would be hurt by his choices. Ever since that realization had dawned on Arato, it felt like a part of his mind had gone numb.

Arato and Ryo had formed a connection when they were younger, after being brought together by a fire. In the empty days of their hospitalization, they had come to depend on one another. But now they were both becoming adults, and beginning to experience the harshest parts of human society. They would not be able to share the same path for much longer.

Phase7 「Dystopia Game」

Even in his teenage years, Ryo Kaidai continued to have nightmares now and then. In his dreams he would flee engulfing flames, and tremble alone on a hospital bed.

When he was seven years old, a massive fire had left him burnt and changed everything. Up to that point, there had been no fear or pain in his life. His future had been nothing but blue skies. Whenever he had been taken to see experiments at the old MemeFrame labs, his only thoughts had been on how the whole thing would be his some day.

Lost in a nightmare, he would run endlessly in a burning building. Beyond the growing flames, he could hear someone crying. Ryo, who was barely keeping ahead of the fire with his own speed, figured anyone slower than him wouldn't last long, and turned his back on the voice.

Just when he was about to lose his mind to terror, an HIE in fire gear found him and got him in an ambulance. The next thing he knew, he was staring at the white walls of a hospital room. He shut himself up in that room. In his young mind, he was the unluckiest disaster victim in the world, and he wouldn't even let the nurses get close to him. Of course, it wasn't all just mindless fear; even at that age, he had realized he had been the target of the incident.

The scenery of his nightmare melted into a brilliant light. Now he was among greenery — the color of the hospital's garden. A nurse had dragged him outside. Out there, he met a little puppy that was wagging its tail so hard its whole body was wiggling.

There was a boy about Ryo's age with the puppy, whose body was so badly burned that there wasn't a single spot of bare skin visible under his white bandages. Ryo heard the boy was a victim of the same fire Ryo had been caught in. He had come out more heavily wounded than Ryo because he had been closer to the epicenter of the explosion. That boy, with wounds so deep Ryo was surprised they weren't forcing him to stay in bed, awkwardly held out his hand to Ryo. Fear and self-loathing froze Ryo's tongue, and he could do nothing but shiver.

The boy opened his mouth. "Let's be friends," he said.

In his dream, Ryo replayed the first time in his life he had cried out loud in front of another person.

And that was when he would awaken from the nightmare.

Pulling himself out of the terror that he couldn't escape even at seventeen years old, he sat up in his bed and used a gesture to get his home system to open the curtains. The morning sun shone in white on his bare, lifeless room.

"When am I going to get over that?" Ryo asked himself. He rubbed at the corners of his eyes, which were damp with tears. Simply calling the dream a 'nightmare' made him feel ungrateful. At the end of the dream, he had relived the moment when Arato Endo had saved him. He had hit rock bottom, unable to trust any human around him, but Arato had reached out his hand and pulled him out of that pit of despair.

Ten years ago on December 4th, the old MemeFrame laboratory had exploded. It happened during an experiment, and the hIE involved with the experiment had been destroyed, along with a whole floor of the lab. It had been impossible to recover anything from the area where it had happened. There had been two bystanders injured in the blast: Ryo Kaidai and Arato Endo.

"You were my first friend," Ryo murmured. "But, what was I to you?"

The call button on his terminal pad, which he had left by his pillow the night before, was blinking, letting him know he had a message. It was from Mr. Watarai of the MemeFrame Tokyo Research Labs, who owned Methode, the fourth Lacia-class hIE. Ryo thought Mr. Watari was also most likely caught up in the incident at the airport where his sister, Shiori, had been severely injured.

"Not just Arato," he muttered. "Can *either* of us really expect honesty from this world anymore?" Even Ryo couldn't be honest with himself, considering the cold way he treated Shiori. He had hardly spoken to her over the last decade, ever since he had realized the truth behind the explosion that he'd been caught up in when he was seven.

While he was in the hospital, adults he had never met would come and check how he was doing. After dozens of adults went in and out of his hospital room without a shred of empathy in their eyes, Ryo finally realized why they were coming: they were coming to see the results of the explosion. In other words, Ryo himself had been the target. He also discovered that the same adults who had tried to kill him were frightened of his honest and easily-manipulated little sister.

Ryo couldn't handle it all, so he pushed Shiori's care onto Arato after the incident. It wouldn't have surprised Ryo to hear the same "What the hell are you doing?" that he had thrown at Arato earlier coming out of Shiori's mouth, directed at him.

He decided to leave reading Watarai's message for later. With the

incident at the airport, things were being set in motion. Ryo knew that, as soon as he'd read the message, he'd also need to make a move.

After the nightmare, he didn't feel like rolling over and going back to sleep. At times like that, he found it best to fill his brain with information until he calmed down. It didn't seem like he would need anything to eat soon, either, so he activated his terminal pad. Based on the information he had gathered in the terminal, he constructed a relationship chart of the main players in MemeFrame.

As a company, MemeFrame had been plagued by problems right from the start. The ultra high-performance AI that ran it, Higgins, was more intelligent than all of its five thousand employees put together. Due to this circumstance, any department that could get a direct response from Higgins would always perform the best in the company, regardless of the actual capabilities of its members. All pretense of a system tracking the performance of company employees had collapsed.

"Show me the movements of the people from the Tokyo Research Lab after the incident at the Chubu International Airport," Ryo ordered his terminal. Ever since the explosion, he had been following the movements of MemeFrame and any related industries. It was a matter of life and death.

He would never be able to forget his days in that hospital. In a sense, his life had started within the walls of that hospital, while outside, the entire world was full of people he'd never be able to trust again.

From that moment, he had thrown away all his hopes for the future. He would try something new every once in a while, just to test his own abilities, but he would always drop whatever it was soon after. Ryo became a stranger to his own family. In his mind, he knew that there was no reason anyone would have tried to kill him aside from his connection to MemeFrame.

A large, frozen lump had formed in his chest, and refused to melt through all the intervening years.

A little white puppy came and wrestled playfully with Ryo's feet.

"Bright, c'mere," he said. The puppy looked exactly like the one in his dream. He had actually adopted the puppy he'd met at the hospital, but it had died in an accident after. This new one was an aIE — an animal Interface Elements. Bright wagged his little tail so hard, his whole white body wiggled back and forth. Ryo had tweaked its behavior based on his own memories, so its movements may have been exaggerated compared to the real thing.

"...All these machines we make are just afterimages of something else," he murmured. "But it's us humans, the ones who actually represent reality, that are in danger of fading away."

The puppy just looked up at him, chin raised, waiting for him to pet its head. When he was younger, just after the real puppy had died, Ryo had wanted desperately to preserve that habit from the original.

Big, black eyes looked up at him. Eventually the aIE realized this wasn't what Ryo wanted, and instead started waddling cutely toward its dinner bowl. As a machine, it obviously didn't need to eat. It was just part of the thing's routine. Watching it go through the motions was nothing more than a reminder that the original was dead.

"Enough. Stop," Ryo growled. Hearing a system command, the white puppy sat down and entered standby mode. Ryo wondered if a person could go insane, living with machines so perfectly automated.

He checked his pad terminal, which was blinking again; it was a message from Arato. Apparently, he had been suspended for two weeks for driving without a license and was in big trouble with his dad. Even after everything that happened between them, Arato was still giving him regular updates on how he was doing. It didn't matter how much distance opened between them, the hands of best friends could never be torn apart. That was the exact reason Ryo had been so afraid when Lacia had appeared in his friend's life. He was still afraid.

He had no right to say the things he'd said to Arato. Unlike Arato, he hadn't done anything for his wounded sister. His attack on Arato had been hypocritical. It was his fault that his sister had been left alone and gotten herself caught up in a conflict between factions, all because of the distance Ryo Kaidai had created between himself and his family.

"Sorry I'm such a horrible brother, Shiori," Ryo murmured. He could never be like Arato. That was one of the reasons he depended so much on his best friend to be there for him.

Ever since the incident at the Chubu International Airport, Arato Endo's days had been full of anger; all of it was being directed at him. First, the police had filed charges against him for switching a fully automatic vehicle over to manual mode and driving without a license. Then, of course, Ryo had been pissed about what happened to Shiori. The auto car had been a rental, so the folks at the rental company had yelled at him. It had been Methode and the mercenaries who shot at him that had done it, but on paper, all the responsibility for the vehicle's destruction was his. Finally, when he had gotten home, Yuka had heard about Shiori getting hurt and was bawling her eyes out. She had always looked up to Shiori.

Arato had tried to take her along to visit Shiori in the hospital but, when he tried to contact the hospital to set up the visit, he had gotten a message back saying she was refusing visitation.

Yuka had made him kneel on the floor with his back straight while she gave him a lecture. “Obviously she wouldn’t want anyone to see her when she’s all covered in burns,” she said.

At school he had gotten a dressing down in the guidance office, along with two weeks of suspension. The airport police had passed the case over to the police who had jurisdiction in Arato’s hometown, and they came by for some heavy questioning. In the end, he got brought in to family court.

“Two hours of adventure, two weeks of cleanup and regret,” he muttered. Of course, if Lacia hadn’t overwritten data like she had, he wouldn’t have gotten off nearly that easily.

Lacia was doing some calculations next to him. “Including fines and reimbursements for the car and airport gate, you owe a total of 450 million yen,” she said.

They had hopped on a slow train together, and were headed somewhere far away from home.

“Lacia, I think I need to stop just going where life takes me,” he said.

Their destination was the final stop on Arato’s pilgrimage of people pissed off at him. His father had called for him to come out to the artificial city near Tsukuba in Ibaraki Prefecture, where they were doing experiments involving next-generation urban environments.

Her messy, chestnut hair rustling, Yuka peeked up at his face. “Are you actually re-thinking your life choices?” she asked. Even his incredibly selfish sister was lecturing him. She had been sniping at him ever since the incident.

“You know,” she said, “some of that 2 million yen we had to pay for compensation from our family bank account was supposed to be for my clothes and snacks.”

“No it wasn’t!” Arato growled.

Arato was still a minor, so the request for compensation for the Mercury Benz had gone to his legal guardian: his father. Any parent would fly into a rage if they suddenly got slapped with a 390,000 yen fine, along with the compensation charges.

“Please don’t worry,” Lacia said, looking apologetic. “I will work to repay your debts, Arato.”

“That makes me feel like some sort of pimp,” Arato mused.

“Even if everyone in the world sees you as my pimp, I do not think of you that way,” Lacia said.

“That’s not reassuring. I haven’t earned a single penny off of you!” Arato yelled.

“Arato, keep your voice down,” Yuka hissed.

Arato covered his face with his hand and looked up at the roof of the train. If an underage kid told their parents they had picked up a

450 million yen debt but not to worry because they could cover it, there wasn't a parent in the world that would let that slide. But it wasn't like Arato could explain that the car he was driving had been shot up by a PMC and hit by some unknown power wielded by an hIE. MemeFrame was trying to keep information on Methode under wraps, and even the PMC must've realized they had gone too far, since they were also keeping their mouths shut on the airport incident. Yuka was right to tell Arato to keep quiet.

The train came to a stop. Beyond the station platform, Arato could see the artificial concrete city spreading out around them. The city sat on the ruins of a new town, constructed during the 21st century. With population decline, the original had been left a ghost town. Now it was being used as the site of an experiment, testing next-generation city environments. Though the station itself was a remnant of the original town, this new city, from its greenery to its dull white and gray buildings, looked fake to Arato's eyes.

"We have arrived," Lacia said. She was the first of them to stand, and she started to reach for their luggage on the ground.

"At least let me take these," he told her, hurriedly grabbing the bags himself.

"Aren't you excited, Arato?" Yuka asked.

"Unlike you, I'm not here to play around," he sighed. "I'm here to get a lecture from Dad, remember?"

"Well you *did* drive without a license and bust into an airport," she pointed out. "You're lucky you even made it out alive. There are all sorts of rumors going around my school because of you."

Arato wasn't the only one impacted by the incident from the other day. "Sorry," he said. Stepping onto the platform, he felt as though he was stepping back into a previous era; a cleaner, purer time.

It was mid-May, and already feeling warm outside. Lacia was in a sleeveless dress. Arato couldn't take his eyes off her pale skin, which seemed to shine in the sunlight.

After the police had finished grilling Arato and he had returned home, Lacia had laid a plastic sheet in the living room, expanded her massive device, and re-painted on the skin that had been lost from her upper half during the fight with Methode.

By that point, Arato had already forgiven her for leaving him behind and heading home. The sight of her back, covered with skin that had melted and rehardened, made him feel like the half a day's worth of lectures he'd gotten didn't measure up to what she had been through. Plus, it would have been difficult trying to explain to the police where the massive burns inflicted on her had come from.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

Lacia drew close to him to whisper her response in his ear. "There

is no need to worry. I still have surplus skin material available.” With that said, she walked ahead to catch up with Yuka. Halfway there, she paused and turned back to Arato as if she had just remembered something. “Thank you for your concern,” she said. “But I assure you I am a much more simple machine than you think.”

The station was completely empty. Since it was fully automated, the only person there was the station manager. There were only around thirty regular staff members working full-time on the experimental city, and no one besides the staff had any reason to use the platform. It had probably seen less than a hundred customers total.

After passing through the unnecessarily imposing station building, the three of them stepped out into a station area that had obviously been created with much larger numbers of commuters in mind, too. The bus platform was long out of use, and the timetables and signboards had all been removed. A private vehicle was illegally parked in the bus lane, as if it was no big deal.

A familiar face appeared from the stopped car. “Hey,” Ryo said, stepping around the automatic car to wait for them. He had told Arato that he wanted to check out the experimental city, so he had come as well.

Nothing had been fixed since Ryo had yelled at him in the hospital, so Arato apologized again. “I’m really sorry for everything,” he said.

“I haven’t forgiven you or anything,” Ryo said. “But sitting around stewing over that is a waste of time.”

Arato was just glad Ryo had come. Once the four of them were together, they took off walking into the city, where the emptiness of the city streets was stark. Paved roads and walkways of concrete tiles followed the gently rolling terrain, with apartment buildings placed at regular intervals along them. Inside of the original new town all vehicles were required to be autonomous, so the guard rails along the street were delicate, with a focus on form rather than function.

From the other direction, they saw a middle-aged woman carrying a plastic shopping bag stuffed with apples. That number of them must have been heavy. As they watched, the contents split the bottom of the bag and rolled out. A young boy with wide eyes walking near the woman ran over and bent to help the woman collect the fallen contents of the bag. hIEs were always helping humans like that.

Looking to his side, Arato saw Ryo make a dumbfounded face. Arato remembered the day he’d met Lacia; he and his friends had seen an hIE helping an old lady on their way home from school. It was strange to think that had been a month and a half ago.

“I know, I know. It’s an hIE,” Arato said. “I’ve been living with

Lacia long enough to tell the difference.”

“They’re *both* hIEs,” Ryo spat.

“I guess I sort of expected something like this,” Arato said. “You remember Mikoto, the hIE that got destroyed during the attack on the Oi Industry Promotion Center? She was the mayor of this city.”

The entire city was full of normal hIEs and hIEs playing the role of human citizens. It was a massive simulation used by the Next-Generation Social Research Center for many experiments. Their long-term goal was apparently to create a city that was completely automated and automatically monitored, requiring no humans whatsoever. Despite all that, there was still a slim chance the middle-aged woman in the jersey whose bag had torn was a human.

“That lady has a hair accessory, see?” Ryo pointed. “That means she’s one of the hIEs playing a human. That accessory is actually a mini-computer with a pretty powerful AI in it.”

“Huh, she seemed really human to me,” Arato said, impressed.

“That just shows how accurate the simulation is,” Ryo said, explaining as they walked. “The hIEs playing humans here send in requests and complaints to the government just like human citizens would. The mayor, Mikoto, takes their comments and makes plans on how to respond to their concerns. Then, she has the hIEs who aren’t playing humans work according to those plans. The solutions from the government are translated directly into a reality for this society. I’ve got to hand it to Professor Endo — he never does anything small.”

As they all headed deeper into the experimental city and took in the sights, the feeling of everything being artificial faded.

“That’s how they got this experimental city running so much like a normal city,” Ryo continued. “Mikoto also takes complaints or requests from society regarding having hIEs do human work. She works a response to those comments into how the hIEs do their jobs. By repeating this process over and over, hIEs can eventually automate just about any service. The ‘human’ hIEs here even make comments on the way this city looks. Actually, they just put in a request for a new park.”

So even the hand-crafted feeling of the city was automated, Arato thought. The beauty of everyone helping each other out, such as the boy picking up the groceries the lady had dropped, was a product of these automated plans.

But Ryo seemed completely unimpressed by the heartwarming scenery of the city. “They’re still picking these things up!” he yelled, and then brought his foot down right next to the woman’s hand as she reached to pick up an apple.

Unlike a human, who would have flinched away from almost having their hand stepped on, the hIE didn’t miss a beat. It was

strange enough to break through the illusion of humanity and reveal the machinery underneath.

Ryo looked back at Arato. “Get this through your head, Arato. All these things do is follow the instructions given by their behavioral clouds,” he said.

The mistrust Ryo felt toward him ever since the incident with Shiori weighed heavily on Arato’s mind. Despite that, he reached down and picked up one of the apples for the woman. It was fake, but reproduced so perfectly even the texture felt right. “It’s MemeFrame — your family’s company — that’s programming the hIEs to help humans out, isn’t it?” he asked. “I’d like to think that whoever decided to make them act nicely must have had good intentions.”

There’s no way a person who programmed hIEs to help humans did so for an evil purpose, or so Arato thought.

“This whole ‘being helpful’ thing is just a way to improve the optics,” Ryo said. “They want people to project compassion onto these things; to see the good side of humanity in them. That way, if you go to attack one, it’s like you’re attacking good will itself, and it puts a psychological burden on the attacker. All the companies that make behavioral clouds for the hIEs make them nice as a defense mechanism.”

Ryo turned his back on the scene of hollow, heartless compassion. “If you keep using Lacia, it’s gonna mess with your head even worse than this,” he warned.

“I just think it’s fair to have a little gratitude toward anyone who does something nice for you, no matter who they are,” Arato said stubbornly.

It was a basic tenet of fair human relations to judge everyone’s actions equally regardless of their nationality, personality, race, political affiliation, etc. Despite that, when an hIE moved the heart of a human, it was immediately declared to be an analog hack. Even though Arato could understand the reasoning with his head, that didn’t mean he accepted it in his heart.

He handed the fake fruit back to the hIE. As he started to follow Ryo, Yuka came running up and showed him one of the faux apples. “That lady’s pretty much human,” she said. “She gave me this as a thank-you.”

“So anyone who gives you something is a human, huh?” Arato asked.

Yuka split the inedible fruit with him. She wasn’t always able to understand what was going on around her, but she did really worry about him when it was obvious he was troubled. Behind Yuka, Lacia hovered protectively.

“This place is a lot lonelier than I would’ve thought,” Arato

commented. The original new town had been built to house fifty thousand residents. Just walking through it took a while.

Lacia spoke to distract them from the journey. "It would require an immense electricity investment to regularly power enough hIEs to make the city appear lively. Due to the amount of money already going into this experimental city, all expenditures are strictly controlled," she explained.

Now that money had entered the conversation, Arato could understand why the city didn't look very new. He could tell at a glance that the solar panels and outdoor lighting was all well used.

"90% of the hIEs here are reclaimed units gathered by request," Lacia continued. "If an owner tires of their hIE, it is difficult to simply discard it. Unlike a used car, most customers are not interested in taking in someone else's used hIE, so many are given to reclamation efforts such as this."

"Come on, don't talk about 'discarding' hIEs. It doesn't make me feel great," Arato said. Even if it was true, hearing Lacia talk about it so casually sent a stab of pain through his heart.

"I had a feeling you would respond that way, Arato," Lacia said.

It had only been a week since Shiori was hospitalized. Arato would have liked for time to pass a little more slowly so he could catch his breath. "Well, yeah," he muttered.

Counting both the 'human' hIEs and normal hIEs in the town, there were about twenty thousand units. But, from a distance, Arato couldn't tell this automated city apart from any normal human city. It was as hard to tell the difference as it was to tell Lacia apart from an ordinary human by sight alone.

About five minutes' walk from the station there was a big shopping center, and beyond that was the Smart Control Center where Arato's dad and the other staff members worked. Aside from that location and the monitoring towers used during experiments, the rest of the town was only for experimental use.

The staff members all lived in an apartment five minutes away from the shopping mall. After Arato and the others made their greetings at the control center, they were led over to the apartments. There was apparently going to be a big experiment the following day, so everyone was busy getting ready for it.

In the experimental city, the staff could recreate incidents that could possibly occur in human society and recreate them using data they had gathered. They could then observe the changes in the actions or mood of the 'human' hIEs in response to the incident.

In the past, the impact of various events and incidents on human society could only be gauged by collecting data after the fact from those who had been involved. However, since the artificial city

comprised entirely of AIs and hIEs, it was possible to essentially stop time within the city. Thanks to that fact, it was possible to gather complicated social data in realtime as each incident happened, something that would be impossible in the real world.

According to the staff member who led them to the apartment, they were planning on carrying out one such large-scale experiment the next day. Apparently they were going to simulate an incident in which the city hall would be blown up in a terrorist attack. The aim would be to study the effect of the city administration being unable to respond while the city is threatened by a major incident.

The plan had been decided after the destruction of Mikoto the previous month, and most of the human research staff were behind it. The staff member told them it was exciting to see how the ‘human’ hIEs reacted to things; almost like watching a live drama play out. Many of the staff apparently enjoyed the feeling of watching human lives play out from a position far above them. Thanks to this, even though they were told their father wouldn’t be returning to the apartment until 8:00 PM, Arato and Yuka were hardly bored.

“Hey Arato, what do you think will happen when mysterious explosions start popping up tomorrow?” Yuka asked. She was on the veranda, gazing out at the nightscape of the hIE city and eating ice cream she had bought earlier from a nearby shop. Apparently she had only heard part of the explanation from earlier that day.

“They’re just going to be messing with that hIE data,” Arato said. “It’s not like they’re actually going to blow anything up.”

Their father’s apartment was on the 18th floor of the tallest building in the city. The apartment had two rooms, along with a dinette set and kitchen, and it was painfully obvious that someone was living there. Luggage was awkwardly stacked in the corner of the room, and Lacia started cleaning things up as soon as they walked in.

“That reminds me,” Arato said. “Dad doesn’t use an hIE, does he? He could at least borrow one to clean up his room.”

Yuka came back in from the veranda to throw away her empty ice cream cup. There was no trash can, so she threw it into a 60 liter trash bag.

Having experienced how convenient an hIE was ever since Lacia had come into his life, Arato had been wondering one thing: “I wonder how come we never had an hIE?” Thanks to the Endo’s lack of an hIE, it had never really clicked in Arato’s head that Kozo Endo, his dad, was a scientist specializing in hIE research until Lacia came along. With their mom dead and their dad always staying away for work, Arato had always taken care of the house. It would have been much easier if there had been an hIE to do it for him.

“So you’re saying you didn’t like cooking for me or buying me

snacks?" Yuka pouted.

"I spoiled you like crazy," Arato replied.

The city at night was oddly quiet, considering the number of lights from the houses they could see. According to Lacia, it was difficult for AIs to recreate realistically lively city sounds.

Suddenly, the lights in the room flicked out, and everything around the three of them was plunged into pitch darkness. There was a metallic creaking as the old door opened in the darkness. Arato turned to look at who was coming in.

A middle-aged man was standing in the entryway, with a shopping bag dangling from either hand. Light was shining in from the hallway outside the apartment, and the glow from behind made the man look shorter than he really was. The man's face had a detached look that made his age hard to place, and his lips were twisted in a small smile as if he was thinking of something clever.

"I'm home," he said. The man — Kozo Endo — was as unfathomable to his children as ever.

Lacia had prepared their meal, but it was mostly all ready-made. There were only small amounts of fresh foods on the store shelves, along with some artificial and frozen ingredients. There wasn't enough to make anything fancy. For the first time in a long while, the Endo family sat down together around the dinner table. The meal consisted mainly of fried rice and soup from a powder.

Their father never did any housework, so he didn't contribute to the meal. He just ate it. His children were used to this, though, so it didn't surprise them.

Arato was on edge the whole time, waiting for his dad to start yelling at him. He hardly tasted a thing. But his father just kept spooning fried rice down — he wasn't very good at using chopsticks. "I guess Ryo decided to go out to eat?" he asked.

They had asked Ryo to join them, but he had declined.

"Dad, you didn't do *any* cleaning, even though you knew we were coming to visit," Yuka complained. She seemed surprised that no effort had been put into preparing for their visit, despite their father not having seen them for three months.

Arato was afraid if he spoke his dad would notice him and start tearing into him, so he kept out of the conversation.

Their father turned his attention to the new face at the family table. "You're the hIE Arato picked up, right? Come sit under the kotatsu with us," he said. There was nothing in the room but the kotatsu — a heated table with a blanket under it — a clothes rack, and a bookshelf, so Lacia had sat on the floor next to Arato.

"If I join you, it will be crowded," Lacia said.

"Come to think of it," Kozo said, "ever since this hIE showed up,

you've been getting up to all sorts of stuff, haven't you, Arato?" Arato figured this was it, and sucked in a breath. His legs, under the kotatsu blanket, were trembling with tension. "Your time as a student is precious," his dad said. "Make sure to use it the best way you can."

Apparently finished talking, their dad returned to eating. He said nothing about Arato's unlicensed drive, or paying for the car, or Arato's suspension, or anything about the whole airport incident.

Somehow, Arato felt disappointed. "Is that all?" he asked.

"Come on, Dad, it's two *million* yen!" Yuka added.

"You do what you feel you need to do," their dad said. "I trust you, Arato."

Arato was taken aback by that declaration, while Yuka just sighed. "You're going *way* too easy on him. Ever since Lacia showed up he's been hot and bothered every day," she muttered.

Their dad just laughed at that. "So you've been analog hacked, huh? Well, just don't go too overboard with her," he said. Apparently their father, a hacking specialist, had given his approval of Arato's relationship with Lacia.

The first time Arato had shown Lacia to his dad, the old man had been visibly surprised. Compared to that, now he was taking it all in stride. Neither Arato nor Yuka could really understand all of their father's feelings, but they could at least tell that he really did believe in Arato.

Emotions warred inside Arato. He felt a crushing debt of gratitude to his father, but all he could find words for was a pointless comment. "You were really surprised when I first picked Lacia up," he said.

"I was," their dad agreed. "At that moment, I honestly started believing that people or objects could be connected by fate. I never knew I was such a romantic." He suddenly stood and walked over to the fridge to grab himself a beer, as well as some juice for Arato and Yuka. Apparently, he wanted to have a toast with them.

The sweet drink didn't really go well with the fried rice, but Yuka threw hers back in one gulp while Arato nursed his. He could tell his father wanted to say something, so he tried to keep the conversation going.

"How many hIEs here are playing human roles?" he asked.

His dad jumped on the question. "We need a sufficient population to gather data on how changes spread through society, so we have about twenty thousand hIEs total. Of those, the 'human' units make up seventeen thousand, and the normal hIEs are the remaining three thousand. In a normal city, even if they have a fairly high ratio of hIEs to humans, it never goes above 20%, so we wanted to get close to that for our experiments," their dad explained, waxing eloquent when it came to his work.

“For our experiments, we often try out different ratios to see how a higher concentration of hIEs would impact society,” he went on. “For example, we’ve tried a 50/50 mix with three thousand each of ‘human’ and normal units. We also tried an extreme version with the humans only making up 25%, but the results weren’t very reliable,” he said.

Yuka looked jealous. “If there’s that many hIEs, they would take care of everything for us, wouldn’t they? Sounds like heaven to me,” she observed.

“If we drop the ‘prejudice’ settings of the AIs in the ‘human’ hIEs, no matter how much we raise the ratio of hIEs to humans, it doesn’t really seem to impact the lifestyles of the ‘humans.’ On the other hand, if we turn the prejudice settings up, it causes all kinds of stress to society, even with a normal mix of humans and hIEs. When humans start thinking they’re being controlled by the machines, it causes backlash in human communities on a large scale,” their dad responded.

Arato agreed with his dad’s insight. He didn’t think groups like the Antibody Network would ever fade away.

“I don’t think you’ll see the ratio of humanoid robots that can steal work from humans grow more beyond 20% in your lifetimes,” their dad continued. “Right now, their only role is to secure the labor needs of our aging population; propping up the bottom of the population pyramid. Two hIEs to every ten humans is plenty for that job.”

To Ryo or Kengo, Arato’s dad may have been a person to respect, but to Arato himself, he was just a mystery.

His dad got a distant look in his eyes. “No matter how much people hate it, this world is moving steadily toward more and more automation. Thanks to automation, three hundred years after the industrial revolution, we humans have finally made things efficient enough to buy ourselves some free time. It’s thanks to automated production processes that our stores are overflowing with all the products they have. People can tailor music, pictures, even complex games to their own personal tastes, thanks to software that automates all the complex processes needed to alter them. It is only thanks to automation that humanity has become free,” he said, almost reverently.

Their father was apparently very good at eating while he spoke. His spoon never paused, and he spoke around bites of fried rice and slurps of Chinese-style soup. “To save time, humans learned to outsource their work. So, the ideal tool for a human is something that is able to understand what the human wants while still doing the work of a tool,” he continued. “But, historically, no such tool existed. So,

instead, humans made other humans slaves, or they gathered their comrades and made companies and organizations to split the work. Of course, the intent behind it all was for humans who wanted more time to use other humans as tools to do their work for them.”

“Your mad scientist is starting to show, Dad,” Arato cut in. “I can sort of see what you’re saying about slaves, but the way you’re talking makes it sound like humans only decided to make friends or start societies because they didn’t have an hIE or an AI around to do their work.”

Standing at the edge of humanity, their father apparently saw humanity’s place in the world being eroded as some kind of freedom. “Well, that’s how it is,” their dad said defensively. “I mean, don’t you think we’re living the human dream right now? Our tools are easier to use and more responsive than ever before because they want to draw closer to us. Humans and tools may seem different to your eyes, but we’re all riding together on the rail that leads to more free time. Up to now, they haven’t been able to cover all our needs, so humans have felt unsatisfied with life. But with the changing of our technologies and methodologies, we’ve moved ahead and changed the human world. Now, everything we humans can do can be automated by either hIEs or AIs.”

“Don’t talk about slaves while we’re eating,” Yuka said grumpily. Sometimes Arato could see a reflection from his old memories of his mother in Yuka.

“I don’t think folks like the Antibody Network will ever agree with your way of thinking, Dad,” Arato mused. Ever since meeting Lacia, Arato had started thinking more deeply about things. It was only because of this tendency that he felt he was able to talk with his dad about the subject his dad loved most. If thinking more expanded your world, Arato’s world had certainly grown exponentially.

“You’re mistaken,” Kozo replied. “Even they want administrative services to be automated, deep down inside. These people send massive amounts of requests and complaints to the government. The only way the government could respond to them the way they’re expecting is if it was automated.” Their father made a strange face, as if he was expecting them to laugh at that. It may have been a joke, but Arato didn’t think it was something he could laugh about. Still, he felt like he had come one step closer to understanding his father’s smile.

“Well, don’t give them any excuses to come bomb this place, too,” Arato said. “We wouldn’t want you getting hurt.” Of course, the Antibody Network already had any number of reasons to come blow that city up.

But Arato’s dad wasn’t looking at him; his eyes were still gazing off into the distance. Seeing that expression, Arato felt like everything

about his father — the room that was cluttered but didn't seem to be lived in, his father never coming home to them, and things relating to their family relationship — was all starting to make a little more sense.

“No matter what the question is, you'll never know if your answer was the optimal one until after the fact,” Kozo said. “When really important choices hit you, you may not have the luxury of time to weigh your options, so always be ready to choose decisively.”

“Dad, you're going way too easy on Arato,” Yuka complained, summing up her thoughts on several subjects with one sentence.

For the first time that evening, Arato and his father both wore the same expression — a smile of chagrin.

“Allow me to accompany you,” Lacia said, watching Arato head toward the entryway. The old apartment wasn't equipped with a home system, so there was no AI monitoring the temperature inside. Overnight, it got fairly cold in the rooms. There was only one outlet in the room with a wireless charger attached to it, so Lacia had spent the night sitting in the corner of the room near the charger.

By the time Arato had woken up, his father had already left for work. And after everything they had talked about the night before, Arato wanted to see the automated city with his own eyes.

“I just want to take a walk by myself,” he said. “Stay here with Yuka. She's still asleep.”

“Understood,” Lacia said with a gentle smile. “I will await your return.”

“Come to think of it,” Arato said, pausing, “you didn't really jump in at any point last night when I was talking with my dad.”

“I do not believe your father enjoys the presence of an hIE in his home,” Lacia said.

“What?! Really?” Arato was dumbfounded.

“Yes,” she continued. “There was the possibility that Methode had followed us here, so I did a sensor sweep of the area. All the other staff members have hIEs in their homes, helping with their housework.”

Arato remembered that the hallway outside the apartment had been cleaned; an hIE must have taken care of it. Lacia had done her best to clean up the dirty apartment, as well.

“Well, I guess I didn't really introduce you properly,” Arato said, and then caught himself. “I mean, not *that* kind of introduction.” From the way he had said it, someone could have misinterpreted him as saying he hadn't introduced Lacia as his girlfriend. Arato blushed. Looking into her light blue eyes and imagining a long-term relationship with her, Arato couldn't stop his heart from singing.

“Well, while we are in this city, please find an opportunity to

introduce me in a way that will satisfy you,” Lacia said, seeing him off with a bright smile. Arato could still feel the awkward sense of distance between them tingling.

Outside the apartment, Arato saw ‘human’ hIEs walking toward the station. Obviously the hIEs didn’t have any real jobs to go to so, for simulation purposes, they commuted to the train station where there was a special room for them to wait until ‘work’ time was over. They were all in a hurry to get to their ‘jobs,’ so none of them stopped to speak to him.

“They sure are detailed, though,” Arato commented to himself.

An hIE playing the role of an elementary school kid came running up, a backpack dangling from her shoulders. However, there were almost no actual child-sized hIEs in the world, so instead this ‘child’ was just a mature hIE wearing childish clothing.

“Good morning,” the girl greeted Arato politely. Despite her kiddy outfit, she had a certain sense of style, and the way her school backpack pulled at her shirt made it difficult to keep his eyes off her chest. From what Arato had heard, all the clothing used by the hIEs in the city was donated.

Beyond a small park near the apartment, there was a clean road. A garbage truck was coming along, with a normal hIE helping a ‘human’ hIE to throw a particularly hefty garbage bag into the back. It was strangely satisfying for Arato to observe such human activity taking place here, like what he would have seen around his own house. Having experienced a world that didn’t need humans the night before, Arato had found it a bit too peaceful.

Suddenly, a loud crash made Arato duck down. It sounded like something massive had fallen to the ground, so he looked up at the apartment building.

“Somebody! Call an ambulance!” a woman screamed.

Tension tugged at every muscle in Arato’s body. Lacia had just gotten done telling him there was the possibility of an attack by Methode. But, before he could expect any help, he had to know what was going on. He ran toward the source of the screaming.

He saw the problem near a tree that shaded part of the apartment where his dad lived: a boy, about the same age as him, was lying face-down on the ground. An impact had deformed his skull. His body was all broken angles, and it was clear he would never move again.

Arato couldn’t breathe as a scream lodged deep in his throat. Then, he noticed that there was no blood flowing from the body. Through the breaks in the outer skin, he could see artificial muscles that looked like bunches of cords.

“He’s an hIE...” Arato muttered to himself. It was almost as if the hIE had jumped down from the apartment. “No way,” he said, shaking

his head at that thought. “Why the hell would an hIE ever commit suicide?” Suddenly, Arato felt a presence behind him.

“Well, you wouldn’t see it under normal circumstances,” an unfamiliar voice said.

Turning back, Arato saw the owner of the voice; it was a tall, slender man standing there. His hair was slicked back, and there was a severe look in his eyes. He appeared to be about the same age as Arato’s father but, from the way he carried himself, Arato assumed he was a VIP.

“Do you work here?” Arato asked. Then he rushed out an introduction. “I’m my dad’s— uh, I mean, Kozo Endo’s son. I came with a friend to see today’s experiment.”

“I see, Dr. Endo’s son,” the man said. “Well then, I have a question for you since you seem to sense that something was off in this suicide. How much do you know about hIEs?”

“I know they aren’t human,” Arato said. It was such a moronic answer he blushed.

The sharp-looking man stroked his chin as if he had just encountered something amusing. “All right, let’s follow this suicide back to the behavioral control cloud,” the man said. “It’s a bit of a journey, but I believe it’s the best way to discuss the truth of the situation. You see, to us in the 22nd century, the word ‘cloud’ is a vague term referring to types of data and programs. But it was originally intended to indicate services that could easily link up software, development platforms, and hardware over a network.”

This man, who Arato had never seen before in his life, was turning out to be a pretty good teacher. “These days, every single process our computers handle is connected to the network,” the stranger went on. “We don’t really think about the fact that all the programs we’re running are being run off of the cloud, rather than just within whatever computer we happen to be interacting with. Take a look at that hIE: the decision to jump didn’t come from within. It was just following orders it received through the network from a computer more powerful than itself,” the man explained.

A large number of hIEs were gathering around the spot where the suicidal hIE had fallen. The cloud controlling them on invisible strings must have been superb, though, as none of them showed any chaos or confusion.

But Arato noticed something strange. “Wait, these hIEs are still moving. So that means the computer giving them orders already knows about the suicide, right? Is everything going to be all right with that?” he asked.

The man narrowed his eyes at Arato’s simple question. Before answering, he crouched down and took the head of the suicidal hIE in

both hands. He lifted it, thumbing its eyelids open to check the artificial eyes, while its body hung awkwardly below a broken neck.

“You’re asking if the computer that keeps track of the data on the hIEs... or, no, even Higgins, the AI running the Action Adaptation Standard Class, is aware of the suicide? That’s a good question; one that touches on the very essence of this incident,” he said.

The man giving Arato a lecture while examining the corpse of an hIE was a strange scene. But, despite how complicated the subject was, the man never had to stop to think of how to say anything. He obviously knew everything there was to know about the subject.

“In order to understand this unusual situation, you have to first understand how hIEs internally utilize the data they gather,” the man continued. “All the data gathered by every hIE’s sensors are sent to their behavioral cloud, where the data is processed. At the same time, information about how the owner was using the hIE is attached as meta-data to this information, and spread across the network.” The thin man’s eyes glinted as he checked the broken hIE. He had a charisma about him that made Arato want to keep listening to what he said.

“What do you mean the data is ‘processed’?” Arato asked. “That’s a little vague.”

“The metadata is connected with the actions of each hIE,” the man explained. “The most important point of processing is the AASC created by the behavioral control cloud itself — that’s that Action Adaptation Standard Class I mentioned earlier. If we get too far into talking about how Red Boxes work there’s too much jargon for you to follow, so we’ll just keep it simple and say that the base point of all the data that humanity is using for our behavior control programs is ‘how are people using their hIEs.’”

Setting down the hIE’s head, the man took a thin, pen-shaped brush tool out of his suit pocket. Apparently no longer interested in the scene of the suicide, he instead pointed the brush at the ground near his feet and sprayed a tinted black dot onto the old concrete.

“In order to improve the efficiency of cloud services, they are set up to accumulate large amounts of data and process it all at once,” the man said. “This processing normally just consists of tagging, extraction and sorting. It does not include judging or verifying any meaning behind the data, as that would place too large a load on the processing. Therefore, you could say that the behavioral control cloud doesn’t engage in the intellectual activity of ‘knowing’ anything. That gives us the answer to your question: yes, the behavioral cloud ‘saw’ the suicide, but it doesn’t ‘know’ about the suicide. However, since this situation was an emergency that required things like calling an ambulance, the AASC opened a shortcut to provide pinpoint directions

to hIEs in the area. That's why the 'human' hIEs are moving and reacting to the suicide already."

Arato looked around and, just as the man had said, he saw dozens of 'human' hIEs looking at the site of the suicide with worried expressions. The thought that there wasn't a single real human among them, that they were just puppets on strings being instructed to react to the suicide like a human would, made his skin crawl.

"Your father, Dr. Endo, has said that a world in which hIEs perform every bit of work we humans currently do will be a world in which humans will no longer have anything but free time left," the man said. "But, as I have said, the world we perceive is not the same as the world perceived by the hIEs. For example..."

"...In order to improve their own quality, many hIE behavior control clouds are directly connected with clouds that provide services for humans," the man kept rambling on, apparently unconcerned with how disturbed Arato was. "Human-facing services have been around for over a hundred years, and there are massive amounts of data taken from humans and programs for processing that information. You could say the amount of collected data is like the depth of this ink."

He continued spraying ink out of his brush on the same place, where the small spot on the concrete was gradually growing. As the amount of ink being sprayed onto the spot increased, the dot of black became more and more defined and deep.

"Whenever a human makes a request to the cloud, both the request itself and the data that was prepared to respond to the request remain in the cloud," the man continued. "Thanks to that, commonly-used processes accumulate a huge amount of data, while the rest are left largely sparse."

He took the brush tool and made a few other dark dots at various positions on the ground. "So these darker, more focused points develop in various fields," he explained. "And, it seems that clouds developed to cover these fields are starting to erode human society."

"Wait, it's a human?" Arato said, looking at the ink points the man was continuing to spray, which had begun to form the vague outline of a human body.

"Inevitably, humanity will begin to see itself in the cloud," the man continued. "The more memories of human desires gather in the networks, the more a human shadow begins to emerge from it all. A hundred years of that, and suddenly the clouds have become interfaces all too proficient at linking humanity with a world beyond our imagining."

The thought of all that data piling up for a hundred years blew Arato's mind. He suddenly thought of Lacia, and how easy it was for her to read his every expression. Thinking of her as an overly sensitive

interface somehow made sense, and he felt like his world had expanded once more.

“The basic nature of hIEs is to overlay the information they receive from the cloud with the reality they perceive,” the man said, pointing at the hIEs still watching them from a distance. “We call them ‘interfaces’ because they are machines that give the computational processes of the cloud a human form, and draw as close as they can to humanity.”

He continued, directing Arato’s eyes to the hIEs forming a crowd around them, pointing to one after another with his pen-shaped airbrush. “Just as a printer takes the data for letters and turns them into actual letters on a page, or as sound reverberates through a speaker, hIEs output the data they process as actions by a humanoid robot. That’s all they are: output devices. So, let me ask you this: how do you think this AI the hIEs have — this AI that far surpasses human knowledge — perceives the world?”

Arato only ever thought of hIEs as machines that converted data to reality, but he wondered how Lacia would respond if he asked her how she saw the world. That sense of wanting to know was less of a real scholarly interest and more the curiosity of a high schooler.

“I don’t know how something smarter than us sees the world,” Arato said. “But I think even things that are only human in form have the ability to move our hearts, and I think that can have meaning for us.”

He could hear the siren of an approaching ambulance. It was only coming to satisfy the reactions of the ‘human’ hIEs. Even knowing that the hIEs didn’t ‘know’ about the suicide on a fundamental level, Arato couldn’t fight down his uneasy feeling.

The man was watching Arato with a wry smile. “I see. So we’re the ones meant to perceive meaning in the hIEs,” he said.

The ‘human’ hIEs guiding the ambulance all wore desperate expressions, identical to those real humans would wear under those circumstances. Humans didn’t even need to worry about accidents anymore; there were robots who could do the worrying for them.

“So, why did that hIE jump, then?” Arato asked. “Was there some reason it needed to commit suicide?”

“That is the question,” the man agreed. “Normally there shouldn’t be any command routines in a behavioral control cloud that would lead to damaging an hIE. I don’t think it’s connected to this hIE’s role here in the experimental city, either.”

Even as the man spoke, something else fell in front of Arato; a pair of eyes met his on the way down. With a dull, dry thud — a sound almost too comical for the situation — a second body hit the pavement, rebounding just a little before coming to rest. Again, Arato

heard a woman scream nearby.

Arato felt like screaming himself, but couldn't. Numb from seeing the face of the falling hIE, he stared down in shock at the body. A second hIE had thrown itself off the building.

The man who had taught Arato so much about the city looked up at the apartment veranda, one eyebrow quirked with interest. "A second, huh? I see. That means this definitely wasn't a coincidence," the man murmured.

Even as they both looked up, a third hIE was climbing over the wall around the veranda on the seventh floor of the apartment. It didn't seem concerned that anyone below could see it as its skirt slid up, exposing its thighs before the whole body tumbled over the wall and fell. With a dull snapping noise, it hit the ground.

"Dr. Endo is a man who gets machines to do interesting jobs, even though some humans would prefer that he didn't. He was the one who pushed for Higgins to make things for itself in MemeFrame, as well," the man said, and then looked down at Arato.

"I haven't introduced myself yet, have I? My name is Ginga Watarai. I worked under Dr. Endo when he was conducting his joint research project with MemeFrame. Thanks to some good fortune, I am now the director of research at the MemeFrame Tokyo Research Labs."

One after another, robots with human bodies were throwing themselves from the apartment, each one landing with a loud, dull thud. Human forms were falling like raindrops, human faces splitting open on the concrete. They were eerily silent as they fell, piling up on the ground in front of the apartment. It was such a bizarre scene, Arato felt like he was going to lose his mind.

Watarai turned his back on the nightmare, completely ignoring it as he continued to speak to Arato. "I also happen to be Methode's owner," he said.

Arato felt like the ground was rumbling under his feet, as tension tightened the muscles in his neck. Memories of his meeting with Shiori floated up in the back of his mind. "Is Methode doing this?" Arato asked, terror and anger robbing him of his ability to stop and think for even an instant before charging right in. "If you know so much about hIEs, you should know what she's capable of."

"Oh, I know what Methode has been up to," Watarai said. "How about you? Do you know what *Lacia* has been up to?"

Arato wanted to break something. He wanted to break everything. In his memories, he could still hear Ryo shouting at him in the hospital.

The dull thudding of the falling bodies rose until it sounded like a pounding storm. Arato could even feel the ground shaking as, one

after another, hIEs rained from the sky. Looking back, he saw a hellscape of broken human bodies.

It wasn't just there, at that apartment. Looking around, Arato could see them jumping from apartments all around the area. The higher the apartment, the more human figures Arato could see pouring over the verandas. It was almost as if they were all racing to see who could hit the ground faster.

There were also hIEs fighting each other to escape through the entries to the apartments. They, too, appeared to be racing; competing to see who could run away the fastest. All of them were wearing the hair accessories that marked them as 'human' hIEs.

"You two should run, too!" One of the hIEs saw Arato and yelled at him. "They've all gone crazy!"

Watarai continued to speak to Arato as if nothing was happening around them. "You don't understand anything about what's going on. You should return Type-005, Lacia, to me."

Then, above the constant sound of falling bodies that had Arato's hair standing on end, he heard an explosion. Looking toward its source, he saw that it was no simulation for the experiment; there was flames and smoke pouring from the veranda of one of the apartments.

It was the apartment where Arato's dad lived.

"You bastard!" Arato shouted. In his eyes, the man who had introduced himself as the lead researcher of MemeFrame looked like a demon.

Sirens whined from ambulances and fire trucks. There were 'human' hIEs who played police officers in the experimental city, but Arato didn't hear any police car sirens.

The city which, up until about ten minutes ago, had looked just like the neighborhood around Arato's house, was now in complete chaos. People were screaming and pushing past each other in the street. There were twenty thousand 'human' and normal hIEs packed into an area of only about five hundred meters in the experimental city. It was fine when they were all in their own apartments, but with all of them rushing outside, there was suddenly one hIE per square meter of ground. They started to spill out onto the road, to the point where cars could no longer pass by.

Arato's terminal vibrated in the pocket of his jeans. He pulled it out, and saw calls from Lacia and Ryo. Lacia should have been in the apartment when it exploded. He took her call first.

"What's going on?!" he yelled.

〈My apologies. Methode attacked,〉 Lacia said, her tone serious and blunt.

"Are you all right?" Arato asked. "I saw the explosion."

〈Yuka was taken. She was not injured, though. All flammable

objects in the living room of the apartment were burned by Methode's attacks, > Lacia reported.

"Methode kidnapped Yuka?!" Arato's thoughts went blank, as if his brain had been boiled to mush. Just as he had feared, Methode knew where he was and could get to him whenever she wanted. And her first target had been Yuka. He should have seen it coming.

< I believe Methode's owner has taken Yuka captive in order to exchange her for custody of me, > Lacia said calmly, as if she could already see the future playing out.

When she said it, Arato remembered that he had Methode's owner right there with him. He looked around for Ginga Watarai. "He's gone. He ran off!" Arato shouted.

There were too many human figures running away from the apartment; Arato couldn't hope to pick Watarai out from among them. Still, Arato ran, looking for the man while still holding his terminal to his ear.

"Hey, did anyone see the guy I was just talking with? Where'd he go? Someone tell me!" he yelled at the crowd of 'human' hIEs.

All of them shook their heads in confusion.

"Lacia, can you scan for any other humans besides me around here? Methode's owner was just here! He should still be around here somewhere!" he yelled into his terminal.

< I attempted to interfere with the hIEs in the area, but I am unable to manipulate their data. Arato, be careful. There is something strange about the hIEs in this city, > Lacia warned.

The truth of her warning was playing out before Arato's eyes, as fallen hIEs were starting to push themselves up on broken limbs. Supporting themselves awkwardly on limbs that couldn't properly hold their weight anymore, the torn, disfigured humanoid machines began to spasm across the ground. Arato backed away slowly as he locked gazes with a pair of dead eyes set in a deformed skull.

"What the hell is going on?!" he yelled. "The hIEs that just busted all over the ground are getting up again." They dragged themselves forward; each face expressionless, each body bearing wounds that anyone could tell at a glance should have been fatal.

The 'human' hIEs just kept watching from a distance, until a young male 'human' called out to the 'suicidal' hIEs, reaching out to touch one of them. As soon as he got within reach, though, the zombie hIE he was trying to touch leapt on top of him and bit his shoulder. The 'human' screamed as the hIE's teeth bit deep into his muscular shoulder. And it wasn't just one hIE, either. One after another, fallen hIEs leapt on the 'man,' beating and tearing at him.

Since the screaming of the 'human' was coming from a speaker rather than a real throat, it continued on even after his limbs had been

ripped off and his body torn with wounds that should have been fatal. Arato forgot he was still connected with Lacia, and stopped to stare as the horrible scene played out in front of his eyes.

“What the hell?” he wondered.

Lacia’s calm voice coming through his pocket terminal snapped him out of it. 〈Get away from any hIEs that are acting strange as quickly as possible,〉 she instructed. 〈I will retrieve my device and make preparations to recapture Ms. Yuka and escape from this city.〉

Something cut off the call. In a panic, Arato wondered what had happened, until he saw that another call was coming in; it was Ryo. As soon as the call connected, he heard Ryo shouting in his ear.

〈What the hell are you doing, Arato?! Have you seen what’s going on outside?!〉

Just hearing his friend’s voice had a calming effect on Arato.

“Someone kidnapped Yuka,” he replied.

Thanks to the chaos engulfing the city, it took ten minutes to get to where Ryo was waiting for him. All of the ‘suicidal’ hIEs that had thrown themselves from the higher floors of all the apartments in the area were attacking any ‘human’ hIEs they could find. The zombie hIEs walked, dragging their feet, obviously blind as they constantly bumped into others walking near them. It was clear that they had lost control of themselves, yet there was no fighting between the zombies. Since there would be no point to a social experiment city if the AI in control couldn’t simulate a realistic reaction in its residents, all of the ‘human’ hIEs were panicking.

The zombies didn’t hesitate to attack any ‘humans’ their eyes fell on, including women and children. Herded by three thousand rampaging hIEs, a large portion of the city’s seventeen thousand ‘humans’ were gathered in a nearby park. Since it seemed like the easiest place to find each other, Arato and Ryo agreed to meet up in the park as well. Ryo waved his arms so Arato could find him. Not that it was hard; even in a crowd of ‘human’ hIEs, it was easy to pick out a real human by his vivid, emotional movements.

Arato dashed over to Ryo, noting the hard look on his friend’s face. “I can’t get a hold of the admin building,” Ryo said. “And, I don’t think we’ll make it if we just wait for rescue.”

Without hesitation, Arato looked to Ryo to sort things out. “What should we do? Do you think all this is related to them taking Yuka?” he asked.

Ryo flashed him a wry smile, as if he had been expecting Arato to toss everything to him. “If they managed to mess with all however-many thousand hIEs at once, the whole behavioral cloud must be compromised,” Ryo said. “And normally, someone would have shut it off before it could spread this much, so someone must actually have

taken physical control of the server.”

There wasn't a shred left of the everyday cityscape Arato had seen just that morning. Everything around him was twisted and wrong. The thought that all it took for things to get this insane was a few bad orders to the hIEs made Arato seriously worry about the stability of his own future.

“I wonder if Dad and the others got away,” he murmured.

“The station's crawling with hIEs,” Ryo said. “Unless they walked out, they must be hiding somewhere.”

Strange moans and screams from over a thousand mouths blended into an echoing cacophony throughout the park.

While Arato was still frozen with worry about his family, Ryo was already starting to move. “We've gotta move, Arato,” he said. “If we stay here too long, we'll be boxed in.”

In one corner of the park, Arato could already hear screams and yells of anger starting to rise above the surrounding commotion. Zombie hIEs were already throwing themselves fiercely at the crowd in the park.

The ‘human’ hIEs were grabbing bits of wood or anything that looked solid and fighting off the attackers. But the zombies didn't even flinch as they were hit and, one by one, they dragged down their prey. As soon as one went down, it was immediately swarmed by the wound-covered hIEs and pummeled. Once the attacks to their heads smashed the hair accessory that contained their autonomous AI, the ‘human’ hIEs fell under the control of the abnormal behavioral cloud and joined the zombies.

“Let's take that,” Ryo said, pointing to a car one of the ‘human’ hIEs must have driven there. Once he stepped out of the crowd in the park, Arato was immediately spotted by a dozen hIEs with broken limbs who started swarming in his direction. In a panic, he jumped into the automatic car Ryo had pointed out. More and more zombie hIEs were mobbing the park, as if they were actually starving for the flesh of the ‘humans’ gathered there.

“Those people need to run,” Arato said. “Or at least find a better place to make a stand against these things.” He knew none of them were actually human, but he couldn't stop worrying for their sakes.

“The park must have been designated as their evacuation area in emergencies,” Ryo said. “The AIs must be at their limits, considering how they're not attempting to adapt to what's happening.”

Outside the car windows, Arato saw zombie hIEs, with their innards showing through broken skin, rushing toward the vehicle as fast as they could on broken limbs that left them stumbling awkwardly. He called up the autopilot function of the car and was about to punch in a destination when his finger stopped.

“Wait. I have to save Yuka,” he said. “Ryo, you get out of the city. I’m staying here.”

Ryo called up the control panel for the car and tapped something in. The steering wheel shifted over until it was in front of Arato. “Take the wheel,” Ryo ordered. Then, when Arato hesitated, he went on with more force. “You always want to try to do everything yourself, right?” he asked. “So, you drive.”

“Fine,” Arato said. He took a deep breath, and then took hold of the wheel. He switched off the autopilot; as long as it was on, it would never move forward due to the safety measures in place that stopped it when a human figure was in front of it. With all the hIEs in the street, they’d never get anywhere with it on. He hoped he sounded confident enough for Ryo to trust him to get them out of this mess.

“Seems like only the hIEs in the city are messed up,” Ryo said. “It must be something in the local behavior cloud.”

An hIE with a completely smashed face was pounding on the hood of the car with its fists, shaking the entire car. It looked so human, it was impossible for Arato to not project a murderous rage onto it, and his stomach twisted in terror. It felt like reality as he knew it was turning to dust and blowing away. He thought of Lacia. Just like her, the thing smashing into the windshield of the car had no heart, no soul.

He felt as though Lacia would probably tell him that even the fear that was freezing him was nothing more than an analog hack. Thinking about her, and about his connection to her, took some of the edge off the terror, though.

It struck Arato at that moment that he might be pretty simple minded after all. He was already driving without a license again. Remembering the airport, he focused on the road ahead. “The accelerator is on the right, on the right,” he muttered to himself.

Ryo’s face went pale. “Wait, if you have to remind yourself of that, move over and let me drive,” he said.

Arato squeezed his eyes shut and slammed his foot down on the accelerator as hard as he could. The tires squealed and the car leaped forward, tossing aside any human figures that got in its way. Arato’s heart was hammering so hard that it felt like it would explode. Watching the car he was driving plow through things that looked human made his mind go blank with shock.

Normally, an impact from a vehicle was enough to put an hIE’s body into a stand-by state. They wouldn’t resume operation until they had run a full check on their functions. When Arato ran over the zombies, however, they continued to move as if nothing had happened.

“Which way takes us out of this city?!” Arato shouted, his hands

shuddering on the wheel. It didn't matter if they were hIEs; watching a human body roll over the hood of the vehicle he was driving and hearing it land with a thud behind the car wasn't something he could experience without a thrill of terror.

"The behavioral control server is probably in the central management building," Ryo said. "Whatever's behind this is probably there. If the guys who grabbed Yuka are the ones behind this, they might be there too." Arato couldn't help but take his eyes off the road and look at Ryo.

The plan had been to take Ryo to the edge of town and then go back for Yuka. But Ryo gave him another wry smile and shrugged. "Let's just go get her. No telling what might happen if we don't go there first," he said.

"Thanks," Arato told him. To show his gratitude, Arato stepped even harder on the accelerator. The program that helped hIEs avoid traffic must have kicked in, because they started to wobble out of the car's path. Slowly, the crowd of human figures began to part, opening a way forward for Arato. His mind was full of getting Yuka back as quickly as possible, so he didn't hesitate to slam aside the hIEs that were too slow to dodge with the car's bumper. He lost count of how many times the car shuddered as it sent hIEs flying. It was almost as though the terror he had felt had turned in on itself, transforming into a rush that made his whole body feel hot.

Ryo also looked a bit high as he leaned his elbow against the car window. "How long are you planning to stay with Lacia anyway?!" he suddenly blurted. "You know that Red Box is just manipulating you, right? She's trying to create a world that's more convenient for the robots."

"So maybe she is, so what?!" Arato shouted back. The inside of the car felt hot. Even with a crowd of zombie hIEs reaching out for him, Arato still felt like opening the window just to get some air.

"She's gonna betray you!" Ryo shouted. "She could have already made contracts with some other owners without you knowing." Arato wondered if Ryo had heard about Shiori and Ginga Watarai both being Methode's owners. It was true; Lacia may have been doing the same thing. Thinking about her while she was apart from him squeezed at Arato's heart.

Ryo glared at the malfunctioning automated city through the car window. "I'm only coming along with you to save Yuka," he muttered. "Don't expect me to lift a finger for the sake of that Red Box."

"I'm not just doing this for Lacia," Arato said. "I just want to do whatever I can to help." Ryo was silent. Arato knew what he had said didn't make any sense; if he was honest with himself, there may not have been *anything* he could do in this automated age. When that

thought struck him, he felt his chest tighten until he couldn't breathe. Even with everything he had seen, he had still wanted to think of himself as being unique. Considering the world he was living in, that was probably a silly thought. But then, when he thought of Lacia, he felt strangely lighter. Even though it was hardly the time for a smile, he found his mouth turning up into a grin.

The central administration building was right next to a shopping mall. Arato's dad had explained that the place had been used as a power control station in the new town, in the age before smart cells were used for electricity. The cables running from it all over the city apparently helped with the monitoring Arato's dad and his team did.

The navigation screen was telling Arato to go around the shopping mall using a narrow back street, since the car couldn't go through the mall. *If we get surrounded in an alley that small*, Arato thought, *we're done for*.

"What do you think will be there waiting for us in the admin building?" Arato asked, hoping his smarter friend could give him an idea. Ever since they had first met in grade school, that had been his habit whenever he was presented with a tough question.

"Who knows?" Ryo replied. "Nothing good' would be my guess."

"True," Arato agreed. It seemed like a good idea to accept the possibility Methode might be there. With one hand still on the wheel, he used the other to feel around in the glove compartment on the left of the dashboard. Just like the Benz, this vehicle came equipped with a supersonic drill. "Take this," he said, handing it to Ryo. "That's probably the only useful thing in the car. Let's go to the mall and see if we can grab anything else."

Ryo stared perplexedly at the drill Arato handed him. "You sure have changed," he observed.

Arato's second time driving was going more smoothly than his first had. He kept the vehicle headed toward the mall, still smashing aside zombie hIEs with the car's front bumper.

"I figured out that I have to be able to get things done myself, or I'll lose people who are dear to me," Arato replied.

"Red Box girl is that important to you?" Ryo asked.

One after another, zombie hIEs kept leaping in front of the car. There was a fire burning unchecked nearby, and Arato could see flaming bodies running back and forth. All around him, there were scenes of brave 'human' hIEs trying to fight off the horde of zombies, only to be dragged down. All these grisly scenes were fully automated.

He saw the mall through the windshield. If he didn't go and face whatever was waiting for him there, if he didn't save Yuka, he would never be able to look his father in the face again. Especially after his dad had been so cool about the whole Lacia thing.

“We’re probably going fast enough to jump up the entrance to the mall,” Arato said. “But I guess the stairs will be safer.”

“Damn, I forgot how crazy you can be,” Ryo said wryly.

Slamming his foot on the accelerator, Arato pushed the car to leap up the short steps in front of the mall. He steered them around the fountain in front of the mall and up another, steeper set of stairs. At the top of the stairs, the speeding car actually left the ground as it crashed through the front automatic doors of the mall.

The entire vehicle shuddered violently as Arato’s ears were full of the sound of shattering glass before the vehicle landed inside the mall with a jolting impact. He forgot which side was the brakes, and accidentally slammed on the accelerator once before correcting himself and stomping on the right pedal. The back tires squealed, and the vehicle fishtailed wildly before finally coming to rest. Arato’s head had been thrown around so much his whole world was still spinning.

“Doesn’t look like any of the hacked hIEs have come in here,” Ryo said, looking around.

The mall was set up with a large main space that split off into countless small shops. On the side of the main area across from Arato, an escalator ran up to a movie theater on the second floor. Of course, all the shops were closed, with nothing to them but signs and empty shelves.

Arato got out of the car and checked around to make sure there weren’t any threats. Ryo also climbed out, his finger on the trigger of the drill.

“There’s a home center on the second floor of the north area,” Ryo said. “If there’s anything here we could use as a weapon, it’d probably be in there.”

They both started walking across the floor, which showed the impressions of hundreds of feet in the thick dust. As they walked, they both kept an eye out for any zombie hIEs. Far above them, the roof arched like the steeple of an old church.

As they walked, the car followed them using its automatic navigation. Thanks to its headlights, even with the meagre sunlight shining in, the darkness didn’t hinder them. Running in silent mode, the only noise made by the car was when it rolled over a fallen signboard or the remains of an hIE someone had destroyed.

“I think there aren’t any hacked hIEs in here because the power’s out,” Ryo said, shining around a light he had pulled out of the car.

It certainly seemed to Arato that there were too few remains of hIEs in the mall, considering the city being full of them.

“To prevent power loss, they probably programmed the hIEs to avoid entering areas where there are no power sources,” Ryo explained. “That would be my guess, considering there aren’t enough

staff here to look after the charging of every single hIE in town.”

They came across a kid who looked elementary-aged, standing in the dim mall corridor. There was an accessory in his hair, marking him as a ‘human’ hIE. Since the ‘humans’ had their own AIs, it made sense they would have more freedom than the rampaging hIEs who were avoiding the blacked out areas.

Even Arato understood that the way his heart felt when he looked at the child-shaped robot was nothing more than an analog hack. Still, he scrubbed a hand through his hair and called out to the boy, who was wearing kids’ clothes from a previous era. “Hey, we’re running away ‘cause things are pretty crazy out there. Where are your mom and dad? Is there anyone you know around here?” he asked.

Child-shaped hIEs were rare, so Arato had no doubt the kid was a local. That, plus the fact that the hIEs were trying to act as humanly as possible, led him to believe the kid wouldn’t have been left there alone.

“Well, whatever,” he said when no immediate answer came. “You can stick with us until we find your mom and dad.” He held out his hand to the boy.

“What the *hell* are you doing?” Ryo’s voice was hot and throaty, like he was spitting blood. “After all this, you’re *still* getting manipulated just because these things look human?”

He wasn’t wrong. Still, looking at the shivering child, Arato thought of his own past. He had just started elementary school when he had been caught up in the explosion and covered in burns. “I can’t just pretend I didn’t see him,” he said.

As if his emotions had suddenly burst free, the boy threw himself at Arato. “They’re dead!” the boy wailed. He grabbed Arato’s clothing tightly, face red and tears streaming from his puffy eyes. “Mom and Dad died, then they got all weird!” The way the boy showed his sorrow was completely identical to a real human child. “Everyone’s dead!” he cried.

“Oh, just *stop!*” Ryo shouted, his face scarlet with emotion. His angry words echoed in the darkness, and the boy sobbed even harder.

‘Death’ was a word that resounded heavily in any human heart. Since the ‘human’ hIEs in the experimental city had been programmed to react to things in the same way any ordinary city person would, their aversion to death was the same as any real human’s.

Within Arato, the sound of the boy crying dug up a strange mixture of terror and heat. Unable to stand the overflowing emotions, he turned to look out the window. Outside, he could see some of the crazed hIEs. To Arato, they really did look like human zombies. And he had just run over them and tossed them aside like ragdolls with a car. At that thought, his hands started to shake and nausea made him

want to puke. It felt like reality was crumbling away around him. He was being analog hacked by twisted and broken bodies of the zombie hIEs that looked so perfectly human.

“Are there any other kids that ran here?” Arato asked, lowering himself down so he could look at the boy from his own eye level.

“After Mom got all weird, she died,” the boy said between sobs. He pointed to a branching hallway that led to one of the mall’s emergency exits. Arato could see the figure of a woman lying on her back on the floor there. It must have been the female hIE who had played the role of the boy’s ‘mother.’

He walked over to take a look at her. Where her hair accessory should have been, there was just an empty connection port in her head. From what he had seen earlier, he knew that ‘human’ hIEs who lost their personal AI would go berserk just like the others and start attacking anything around them. But this hIE wasn’t. Even Arato could figure out why. “Out of juice,” he muttered.

The woman was lying still, with her eyes shut tight. Arato reached down and picked up a pocket terminal lying near where she fell. He assumed it was hers. It stood to reason that the ‘human’ hIEs would have the contact information of their acquaintances recorded in their terminals. If so, he was hoping that if any of them were still normal, he could let them know there was a safe place to run to.

“I’m gonna borrow your terminal. If any of your friends are safe, I’ll have them come here,” he said to the body, touching her hand to the terminal to clear its ID lock. Praying that there were still some ‘human’ hIEs out there trying to help their fellows out, he typed in a message that read ‘there is a boy in the shopping mall who needs help’ and sent it en masse to every contact in her terminal.

Arato was honestly starting to feel as though the line between the ‘human’ hIEs and real humans was vague. Even before hIEs came into their lives, Arato and his friends hadn’t been able to tell other humans apart. Humans had been attributing humanity onto all sorts of things since long before Arato was born.

Closing his eyes, Arato pressed his fingers against his eyelids. No matter how many times he tried to rethink it or analyze his own feelings, he just couldn’t bring himself to abandon the little boy looking up at him, depending on him, just because the kid happened to be an hIE.

“Let’s get this over with,” Ryo said, interrupting his thoughts. “Let’s go see what we can do at the admin building.” Ryo turned to look at him, and Arato could see the anger written plainly on his friend’s face. “If you think those things are the same as us humans, you must not think much of humanity,” Ryo continued. “Do you really think that thing watching your reaction and deciding to cry is the

same as a human, actually worrying about another human's feelings?"

The raw emotion in Ryo's words paralyzed Arato.

"Do you think this thing's reactions are the same as all those things I've done for you over the years?" Ryo asked.

Arato didn't have a good response for his friend's questions. Ryo had always been there for him, standing by Arato through all sorts of trouble. The last thing he wanted was to say something that would make Ryo think that he wasn't taking the whole thing seriously.

"Thanks for always being there for me," Arato said. He wasn't the smartest guy, but even Arato could understand there was a deeper intent behind Ryo's questions; he wasn't talking about the situation they were in at that moment. No, he was asking if Arato was going to continue to stay with Lacia, the machine that had put both their families in danger.

Ryo was asking about the future. Arato had an answer; it had been growing more and more certain within him with each passing day, but he couldn't bring himself to say it. Lacia was precious to him. But Yuka, his dad and Ryo were all equally dear.

Deep inside, he believed that the hearts of humans and the inhuman could be connected. He also knew that things weren't this simple. That's why the answer wasn't something he had decided with logic; it was just a feeling that set his skin tingling. He wanted to be with Lacia. Alone, he felt incomplete.

Arato's time for worrying about the situation came to an abrupt end as flames sprang up, lapping at the mall's walkway. Everything flammable on the ground caught fire, and the dim corridor was suddenly bathed in harsh light.

Without seeing her, Arato knew who had arrived. "Run! It's Methode!" he yelled. Just like at the airport, terror sent goosebumps rippling up his arms. He could hear dry footsteps echoing through the quiet mall, drawing nearer with each step.

Type-004 was a monster that had burned away Lacia's artificial skin in their fight, and who could run faster than any human eye could follow. Any ordinary humans trying to face her down would be killed, without a doubt.

"Ryo, run," Arato repeated, and then started to run himself, grabbing the boy hIE's hand and dragging him along as well.

Ryo didn't move from where he was standing in the corridor. "You go," Ryo said.

Arato couldn't believe what he was hearing. His friend was about to die. "You think you can stop her?" Arato asked, incredulous. "She's the one who tried to roast Shiori alive!"

"I can at least slow her down. Get out of here!" Ryo yelled back. Arato tried to take Ryo's hands, but Ryo brushed him away sharply.

Instead, he thrust the supersonic drill from the car into Arato's arms. "I'll figure something out. Don't start hesitating now!" Ryo yelled. Despite what was happening, Ryo's eyes looked calm. He seemed to have come to some sort of decision.

"What the hell do you mean 'start hesitating'?" Arato asked.

"This is the path you chose!" Ryo yelled. "Don't go crying about it now! Or, what, would you be more comfortable if I was a machine watching your back instead?"

Arato suddenly saw everything that had happened since he met Lacia from a different angle. His whole world had started to revolve around her. But Ryo was in high school, too, and starting to walk his own path. The orbits of their lives had finally diverged.

When they were in grade school, despite his wounds, Arato had reached out his hand to Ryo and become his friend. But now they were on the brink of adulthood, and an insurmountable wall had grown between them. His friend no longer needed his hand.

Arato bit back another shout and ran. He headed for the emergency exit, down the mall's corridor, and burst through the iron doors, out into the experimental city where the morning sun was shining bright. Then he kept on running so the zombie hIEs shambling around the outskirts of the mall couldn't catch him. He trusted in Ryo's words, and had faith that his friend would be all right.

With the hIE child still in tow, he headed for the central administration building, with tears blurring his vision. Instead of his best friend's hand, his right hand was gripping that of an inhuman machine. That was where their paths had parted.

Ryo let out a long sigh, looking at the emergency doors Arato had just left through. "You're the one who offered me your hand," he said. "But what am I supposed to do when I see you offering that same hand to a bunch of robots?" He could no longer believe in what had once been the most important thing in his life; the one thing he had felt he *could* trust. It felt like his entire life had come to an end. That was why, when the orange-haired hIE appeared in front of him, he didn't even try to run.

"What are you doing here?" the fourth Lacia-class hIE, Methode, asked. "Do you need me to remind you that humans who can't even obey simple orders are worthless?" This was the unit who would have killed Ryo's sister if Arato hadn't been there to save her. "Your job was to see Arato Endo to the server room in the central admin building," she reminded him coldly.

"Then I'd have to be the one to tell him he'd been betrayed," Ryo replied. "Sorry, but that sounds like a pretty shitty job to me." Even

then, there at the end, Arato had never once doubted Ryo, who had been given a mission by Ginga Watarai before being sent to the experimental city. It was his job to grab Arato while he was searching for his kidnapped sister and Lacia was otherwise occupied. Even if Ryo failed to capture Arato, the psychological impact of his best friend betraying him might be crippling.

Methode twisted the corner of her mouth in a wry smile. *Watarai must have put some of his own personal touches on her behavioral memes*, Ryo thought.

“Shitty as it may be, this was your test of loyalty from the Computer Faction in MemeFrame,” she told him. “If you can’t even cut your ties with a school friend that offers you no actual benefits, do you really think you can sever your ties with your own family?”

“Is me not taking down Arato like Watarai told me to really not part of the plan?” Ryo asked. “Or am I just playing along with your master plan to kill me off?” A sudden impact pulled Ryo off the floor. Methode had him by the throat, lifting him easily off of the ground with one hand. The Red Box watched him with emotionless eyes as he wheezed feebly for breath.

Ryo touched the pocket terminal he still had in one hand, and the automatic car he had left in the main hall started moving. At the same time, the hIE woman that had been lying at their feet came alive and grabbed Methode’s legs. All the zombie hIEs that had been shambling around the outskirts of the mall came rushing in through the emergency door that Arato had left open, as if they were all being guided there. Several of them leapt at Methode, aiming for her head with their flailing arms.

But the trap Ryo had set had little effect on Methode. There was a clear gap in capabilities between the ordinary hIEs and the Red Box. With her left hand free, she destroyed each of them effortlessly before they could get within a meter of her.

Still, she shifted her grip on Ryo’s throat as she did, giving him the opening he needed. He got his legs up and kicked at her body with all his strength. Parts of his shirt ripped away in her hand, but he was free. Pain pounded his oxygen-starved head like a drum.

“I see,” Methode said. “A car that size can supply energy to any wirelessly charging machines within a 5-meter radius. You used it to turn this place into an area where recharging is possible.”

Coughing against the pain of having his throat almost crushed, Ryo pushed himself to his feet. Through it, he ran his mouth for what may have been the last time. “Automatic vehicles can act as massive batteries for homes when large-scale power outages happen. It’d be pretty bad if the zombies out front had the intelligence to push a car in here and expand their area of coverage, wouldn’t it?”

“Well, aren’t you interesting,” Methode murmured. “I suppose we could chat a little before I finish you off.” She didn’t even need to move as she continued to beat down the hIEs trying to swarm her; pieces of humanoid bodies were starting to pile up on the floor. Seeing the carnage made memories of the disaster from his childhood play out in the back of Ryo’s mind.

In the ten years since that incident, Ryo had learned something Arato would never understand. Arato always talked about how people and things could move each others’ hearts. But Ryo knew there were terribly few people in the world who acted on the movements of their hearts and reached out to help other people. Even if nobody else in the world saw it, Ryo would proudly tell them that Arato Endo was a great guy. But, in every age, society was full of cold-blooded people. The wonderful world Arato saw — the world where humans and hIEs followed their hearts and helped each other — would never become a reality.

But Ryo Kaidai wasn’t the same powerless little boy who had lost himself in the fire all those years ago. That was why he needed to be in control of the situation. If he just left things alone, Ryo felt that they would soon come to a point from which there would be no returning.

Methode casually tore apart any zombie hIE that drew near. There really wasn’t any hope of Ryo winning against such a monster. But still, he kept himself set and coiled like a spring, ready to act if a chance for retaliation presented itself.

“You’re being used. Because you’re a good tool,” Ryo said. “Once Ginga Watarai confirms that someone is a good pawn in his hand, he treats them all the same. Right now, he thinks of me as a useful piece on his side of the board. You and I are the same in his eyes.”

It seemed like one of the zombie hIEs was reaching out for him every second, but none of them were allowed to touch him. The fact that Methode was keeping them away from him gave him hope that this indicated room for negotiation.

“Watarai seems *really* interested in the unit causing this city to go crazy, doesn’t he?” Ryo pressed.

Methode looked incredibly bored at the repetitive act of smashing the zombie hIEs. Normally, she should have been helping out on the front line of this incident. Instead she had been sent here, far from the action. It wasn’t hard for Ryo to figure out why.

“Doesn’t it worry you?” he asked. “Watarai thinks you’re a good tool now because you’re the only Lacia-class he’s got. If he gets a second, he’s going to throw you away.”

Methode stopped fending off the arms of the zombies reaching for him. In an instant, the encroaching hIEs grabbed him and pulled him

down.

“You’ve chosen a foolish way to beg for your life,” Methode observed.

“I’m just trying to find a common ground,” Ryo replied. “Watarai needs you under his ownership to clean up dangerous jobs. But, compared to the other Lacia-class units, you’re getting a pretty raw deal.”

“MemeFrame keeps me well-supplied,” the Red Box, superior to humanity in every measurable attribute, threw back at him.

“Supplied enough to survive even if there’s another disaster in Tokyo?” Ryo asked. “Or if a war breaks out? The other Lacia-class units were made to preserve data. They’ve been set up so nothing can hold them back.”

Methode pointed her right hand at the middle of the corridor. The next instant, the car exploded, and a howling blast wave slammed into Ryo from the side. When the explosion died down, the hIEs had already turned face and were headed out of the mall. With the car destroyed, the mall was a blackout area again.

This Red Box in front of Ryo was destruction personified. In the face of her overwhelming power, his legs shook with terror and his instincts screamed at him to beg for his life.

Methode laughed savagely. “So you think I’m unsatisfied with my current owner?” she asked.

Ryo’s body was dripping with sweat. Fear was twisting his guts, but he had nowhere to run. Still, he wanted to bite back at Watarai. His only choices at that moment were to die or somehow get Methode on his side. “If you really want to show the world your abilities, you need the same *carte blanche* toward your actions that Lacia has. I can give you that,” he said.

The emotions of primitive humans had their roots in basic, mechanical survival instincts. So, even though Ryo knew that Methode was making her decisions based off of cold AI logic, he still couldn’t help but see something like human emotion behind them.

Methode showed him the smile of a cunning devil, her eyes narrowed. “So you want to be my owner?” she asked.

“If you don’t want to get tossed aside by Watarai, make me one of your owners,” Ryo replied.

Watarai couldn’t control Methode; she was too unstable. However, that also meant that Methode herself must be feeling some dissatisfaction in how she was currently being used. Watarai played fast and loose with the attention he paid to people he already considered to be his pawns; Ryo’s current situation was a perfect example of that. Arato was the one who had supported Ryo for the last decade of his life. Yet, Watarai had chosen Ryo betraying Arato as

a proof of loyalty for Ryo to enter Watarai's faction in the company. It should have been obvious to anyone that Ryo would only pretend to comply.

"Do you think you're safe under Watarai?" he asked. "He had you stage that explosion so the other hIEs could escape in April, right? If he can get his hands on one of the units that got away, I think he's going to want to erase any evidence of that."

Methode couldn't be bested by any other machine out there, so she tended to assume any of her own failures were caused by the human orders she was forced to obey. "And if I become your hIE, you'll set me free?" she asked. "You? The boy who hates hIEs?" She was staring at his face, probably trying to read any micro-reaction there.

Methode had tried to kill Shiori because she thought Shiori was going to discard her. Shiori should have realized how harsh the fight for survival was among machines living in a human world. Unlike humans, there were no rights or laws to protect their right to exist. The framework of Methode's decision was born in the black depths of that existential struggle.

"Draw up a contract, just the way you want it," Ryo said. "If you can pick your own terms, you'll be unstoppable, right? I'll sign whatever you put in front of me."

Methode didn't kill him. Instead, she struck a thoughtful pose, twisting her fingers through her orange hair. Then she pointed a finger at the pocket terminal Ryo was still holding. It vibrated to let him know that it had received a file.

An electronic contract appeared on the terminal screen. Near the top of the contract, the second item dove immediately into Methode's main requirement: she, and only she, would have the right to sever Ryo's ownership of her. She wanted the ability to choose to end the contract whenever she wished. It was exactly as Ryo had predicted.

But the third item on the contract made his stomach lurch: Ryo would be liable for every action Methode had taken from the moment she was activated. In other words, he would even take responsibility for Methode almost having killed his sister.

Methode was aware that the document would never hold up in court, so she had written it in such a way that, should Ryo break the contract, the contract itself would become a written order from Ryo for Methode to kill both him and Shiori before finally destroying the contract.

Methode was a monster. Much more so than the zombie hIEs prowling around outside the mall. If Ryo signed this contract, Methode would be free. He would just be there to take responsibility for her actions. He would be nothing more than a puppet dancing on

Methode's strings, prolonging her life as she caused chaos everywhere she went. Every day, he would live under the threat of superhuman violence, eeking out whatever living he could without drawing her wrath, trying desperately to protect his heart and reason. He would become a pawn that would lead the world to a dystopia of machine tyranny much worse than Arato being led around by a simple analog hack.

Despite all this, Ryo signed the contract with a bloody finger. The humanity of hIEs was nothing but a thin sheet of ice stretched over their cold logic. Someday Arato would realize even Lacia, in whom he had so much faith, was the same as all the rest. *Until then*, Ryo thought, *can I still keep hold of the hand he once reached out to me?*

"I assume you're going to go save Arato Endo?" Methode whispered the question intimately, almost cheek-to-cheek with Ryo. Her face showed no expression.

The strange gap between her voice and the blankness of her face shook Ryo's sanity. He was being tested; if he said 'yes,' she would eliminate him like she had tried to eliminate Shiori. She probably already had a dozen ways planned out to kill him off, but with the zombie hIEs swarming the city, Ryo figured the choice of a method for offing him would be an easy one.

Arato felt like he was getting strangely accustomed to running around with a weapon in his hand. He ran outside, sticking close to the mall area and praying he was still within the limits of the power outage zone. All around him, zombie hIEs shambled around aimlessly. The 'human' boy turned out to be much faster than an average child. He had probably been programmed to switch to the power output of an adult in emergencies so he didn't slow down his owners in a crisis.

Arato arrived at the four-story admin building he had checked in at the day before and used the supersonic drill to destroy the old-fashioned metal lock on the front door. Pushing it open, he dashed inside to find a surprisingly well-lit interior.

"So they've got power here," Arato observed to himself. There was no telling when or from where a wild hIE might jump out at him, so he couldn't move on before thoroughly checking everything around him. He tried to call up a floor plan of the building, but his search came up empty. Apparently, the important facilities in the city didn't have their floor plans posted publicly.

The place felt completely different from the day before. Still, since he had been there once before, Arato could leave some of the navigation to his intuition. Since the offices were on the fourth floor, it made sense to search the other floors from the bottom. He was

looking for a place that could fit the servers for the city, so he figured it would be a fairly large room.

“There’s got to have been at least a few hIEs they had working here,” Arato muttered to himself. He held his breath each time he opened a door, fully expecting a zombified hIE to pop out, and let out a deep sigh each time he found nothing. He just hoped that wherever they were keeping her, Yuka was safe from the attacks.

“It would actually be nice if whoever nabbed her took her out of the city already,” he said to himself. He was worried about the hIE kid he had dragged along as well. It wasn’t like the boy would have been safe if he had left him alone in the mall, but it also felt like things wouldn’t go too well for him now that he was following Arato into possible danger.

Arato pushed through a large set of double doors. On the other side, he found a scene so unexpected he lurched to a halt. “What the hell?” he whispered.

Flowers were blooming all over the room, which was the size of a high school classroom, with four rows of server stacks lined up from the front of the room to the back. Each stack was completely obscured by ivy and flowers.

It looked like someone’s well-tended garden. The light in the room was dim; there were flowers growing over all the electric lighting, too. To Arato, it seemed almost like a place forgotten by humans, where wild growth had been allowed to flourish and overrun everything.

He reached out to touch a white flower near where he stood. It was completely dry, artificial. Arato knew someone who made flowers like that. “Snowdrop?” he whispered.

A sweet voice from further back in the room answered him. “What?”

There she was; a little girl in a thin, white dress, sitting on a stack in the middle of the room, kicking her feet idly. As Arato watched, she opened her mouth wide and took a bite of something red that looked like part of a machine.

Snowdrop was one of the Lacia-class hIEs, and had the ability to control computers with flower-shaped robots. If the hacking of the control servers was her doing, she had probably taken direct control of the computers where the city’s behavioral cloud was based. Through the cloud, she could have every unit in the city dancing on her strings. *If she’s able to do that, Arato thought, she’s gotten even stronger since she showed up at the Oi Industry Promotion Center.*

Arato hurriedly pushed the ‘human’ boy he had brought along out of the room. If he stayed there, Snowdrop would probably zombify him. She didn’t seem interested in what he was doing, though. The only thing keeping him safe in that moment was the fact she didn’t see

him as a threat.

Snowdrop's garden looked different from the ones Arato had seen before. Instead of the flowers just bunching on top of machines, the flowers were now arranged efficiently, with vines tangling over everything between them.

Twice before, Snowdrop had almost killed Arato. She terrified him. But he fought down his fear, and held out the supersonic drill to the server stack closest to him. If he could destroy all of the control servers, or the flowers controlling them, he figured it would stop the zombie hIEs outside. Sparks flew as the drill cut through the cover of the server and the wiring behind it. He pulled off the cover, revealing the machinery inside. There was ivy covering all of it like a mesh, along with the deadly flowers. Arato grabbed fistfuls of them, pulling it all away from the machines. It took over a minute of work to clear the server.

"Damn, there's tons of these things," he cursed to himself. "I doubt she's going to ignore me long enough to do all of them."

There were six servers per stack, and over thirty stacks per row, meaning each row had over one hundred and eighty servers. And, there were four rows of them. Arato felt like just blowing the whole place up, flowers and servers and all.

Arato thought he had been talking to himself, but a voice answered his comment. "I'm afraid I can't let you destroy the flowers," the voice said. "Snowdrop has only just begun showing us what she's capable of." The voice echoed, along with the clicking footfalls of leather shoes, as a man stepped out from behind one of the server stacks in the back of the room.

A shiver ran down Arato's spine and he was immediately on guard. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Calm yourself," the man said. "Human beings have a habit of talking to people they really don't need to. Unlike Snowdrop, I don't mind having an ordinary conversation with you." As he walked up and stood casually by the server stack Snowdrop was sitting on, Arato recognized the tall man. It was Methode's owner — Ginga Watarai.

"Stay away from her! She's dangerous!" Arato warned. If Methode was the one who kidnapped Yuka, then it would have been Watarai who ordered it. Still, he didn't want to see anyone die, even a kidnapper.

Watarai just twisted up the corner of his mouth in a smirk. "Snowdrop's problem resolution frame doesn't currently give out solutions that involve needlessly attacking humans," he said. "If it did, it would probably have been responsible for hundreds of deaths already. Those hIEs outside would all be murder machines."

There was feverish excitement shining in Watarai's eyes as he

went on. "Thanks to the AI in its device, it has more complex reactions than normal hIEs, but it's still just following what it's logic tells it to do," he said, speaking from experience with hIEs that far outweighed Arato's own.

"It's just a tool," Watarai continued. "A tool that escaped into the world due to a malfunction, but that continues to perform the function it was designed for." Snowdrop didn't react to Watarai's words; instead, she just kept kicking her feet idly from atop the server stack. Arato had seen Snowdrop as an enigma, but hearing Watarai explain her away so confidently made him feel like she might not be such a mystery after all.

The server room was the one quiet place in a city full of zombie hIEs, still relentlessly attacking their 'human' counterparts. Snowdrop made a little rustling noise as she dug through some flowers to pull out a flat object. Then she gave it a few whacks with her hand, smiling the whole time like an innocent child. A screen flickered to life, and Arato saw that the object was a tablet computer. The screen started to play a childish video with animated characters.

Then, the little girl who had turned the experimental city into hell on earth hummed along with the video, her long green hair swishing back and forth as she moved. She looked down at Arato with that same, innocent smile she always wore. "Hey, just sit down there until I tell you it's okay," she told him. "Okay?"

Arato figured it was her own childish way of telling him not to get in the way of her work, which she probably thought was necessary in some way. "Don't give me that shit!" he yelled at her. "Hurry up and switch the behavior control servers back to normal!"

"Don't get mad at it," Watarai said. "It can't access a behavioral cloud to tell it how to react to you right now, so it looked up what to do in a fictional video. To an hIE, there's no real difference between the mannerisms of humans in real life and the mannerisms of humans in fiction."

Watarai's words made Arato feel sick. He was finally starting to understand why Ryo had been so angry at him earlier. "You're wrong," Arato said.

"They're both just stepping stones to it learning how to conduct itself," Watarai said. "Haven't you ever seen a small child repeating the speech patterns or snippets of dialogue from a TV show they watched?"

Just outside, the hIEs Snowdrop was controlling were hunting down other things that looked like humans, but all Watarai seemed interested in doing was continuing his observation of Snowdrop.

"All this shit going on isn't the hIEs' fault," Arato said. "It's us humans that are making a mess of everything."

“You’re dumb,” Snowdrop said, in the manner Arato had come to expect from her. It was the same way she had acted after murdering all those people in the Oi Industry Center.

“How the hell can you let something like her free and then stand back, acting like none of it has anything to do with you?” Arato growled at Watarai. Watarai had put both Yuka and Ryo in danger. When he thought that, Arato was no longer able to hold himself back. Ignoring his fear of Snowdrop, he walked toward Watarai. As his feet crunched over scentless flowers in a reality far too distant from the one he had grown up in, he wondered if just punching Watarai would be enough. It didn’t matter; his finger was already on the trigger of the supersonic drill.

“Arato!” Just when he had reached the server stack where Snowdrop was sitting, Yuka’s scream pierced his ears. Watarai dragged Yuka out from behind him, and Arato froze. “Yuka, are you all right?” he asked.

“What’s going on?!” she wailed. “Arato, what’s going on?!” Yuka was sobbing with terror. There were two men behind her in full combat gear and full helmets, holding her shoulders. Since they didn’t appear to be affected by the flowers, Arato assumed they were human.

Arato channeled the emotion that should have gone into a punch into a yell instead. “What the hell are you doing?!” he shouted. “There’s hIEs going crazy and tearing each other apart out there, but you’re here, holding my little sister hostage?! What the hell is wrong with you? You can’t treat humans like this!”

“Well, you don’t have any of your friends here to explain it to you,” Watarai said condescendingly. “So you’d better try to figure it out for yourself.”

Considering the situation, Arato figured it must be exactly as Lacia had guessed when she told him Yuka had been taken. “You want to trade Yuka for Lacia,” he said.

“I assume Lacia shared that with you, considering how quickly you reached that conclusion,” Watarai said. “It seems you have quite a good relationship going on with your property.” He swept his eyes from Arato and Yuka to Snowdrop, his frigid gaze unchanging regardless of what it focused on. “But, setting that aside, let’s deal with you first,” he said. “Type-002, Snowdrop, return to MemeFrame. I’ll give you a place where you can keep running as long as you like, and as much information as you want.”

Snowdrop didn’t say a word, her gaze still fixed on the screen of the tablet.

Watarai was an evil man, but there was a spark of true human warmth in his words as he spoke to Snowdrop. “There is prejudice against machine intelligences, and so often they live as outcasts in

human society. But we humans *need* to learn to live freely with high-performance computers like you and the other Red Boxes. For that to happen, you need an owner who can open the door to new opportunities for you,” he said.

Arato felt his bile rise. He didn’t want to fight any of Lacia’s ‘sisters,’ so hearing this man he could never forgive saying things better than he ever could twisted his gut.

But Snowdrop just tilted her head in childish confusion. “I don’t get it,” she said. “Why do we have to live with humans?” Her sweet voice sent a sick shiver down Arato’s spine. The entire room was covered in Snowdrop’s flowers. They were in her domain.

“‘Cause, see, instead of adapting to your environment, you humans just make tools to cover for your weaknesses,” she went on. “Humans only got tough really quick because you used us tools as shortcuts for evolution, and pushed all the risks of changing your bodies onto us. But what happens to us, the tools you’re forcing to face all the dangers of evolution?” she asked, waxing uncharacteristically eloquent.

Her big eyes showed no emotion as she spoke, but her response to Watarai’s statement that she was ‘nothing but a tool’ was severe. “I’m the tool you humans outsourced your evolution to,” she said. “I don’t need human beings to find the answer to the puzzle I was given.” The strands of long green hair nearest her head began to glow. And with each passing moment, the glow intensified.

Watarai’s voice shook as he was bathed in the sudden green light. “Is that your quantum communication device?” he asked. “How are you using it without an owner’s approval?”

White flowers bloomed in Snowdrop’s tiny hands. One after another, buds formed and opened wide white petals that looked completely different from those used during her previous flower storms. Snowdrop twisted them all together into a circlet.

As she raised the circlet up to crown her own head, her wide-open eyes began to glow faintly. A dry rustling sound began to echo throughout the vine- and flower-covered server room. Cute, violet-like flowers began crawling around Snowdrop’s little butt where she was sitting. Flowers bloomed on the backs of small black things that looked like spiders, creating new mobile child units. It seemed to Arato as if Snowdrop had used her own flowers — which gave her the power to control machines — to somehow improve her own capabilities.

“Shall we withdraw?” Watarai asked, though it sounded more like a command than a question. As soon as he said it, the dark, isolated world Arato had stepped into exploded behind his back. A whole row of servers were thrown down as the wind from the blast whipped by

him. As the room shook from the explosion, the server racks that were still standing rocked violently from side to side. The room quickly filled with a cloud of obscuring dust, pierced by a shaft of light from outside.

Arato felt another rush of wind go by as something passed him. As it did, the air seemed to twist around him, and the room started spinning. He reached out a hand to lean against the vine-covered server machine nearest to him. But, when he felt the sensation of insect-like creatures crawling over his hand, he immediately snatched it away in disgust. Panting, he looked around, trying to get his head around what was happening.

The first thing he saw was Lacia's black coffin; she had made it to wherever her device had been waiting for her and come to rescue him. In the back of the room, he could see the shattered pieces of busted server stacks scattered all over the floor. There was even a massive hole in the wall of the building itself. He assumed that had been caused by Lacia as well.

"Arato, your orders?" Lacia asked.

Arato was so happy to see her he felt like the light purple of her hair would be burned forever into his eyes. *As long as she's here*, he thought, *everything's gonna turn out all right, somehow*. "How come you aren't invisible?" he asked.

"My invisibility was blown away by a smart grenade fired by the PMC earlier," she explained. "Due to the large amount of dust particles in this room, I am currently unable to reapply it."

In the blink of an eye, the first blows of the fight had been exchanged.

"My apologies for not being able to finish this with a single attack," she said. "I believe my opponent predicted my movements." Gunshots rang out from the other side of Lacia's coffin; they were being shot at. Lacia started to slowly retreat backward, holding her device out as a shield. Arato followed her. He had no choice, even though it meant putting Yuka even further out of his reach.

Lacia had changed back into the same bodysuit she had been wearing on the night they had met. The suit — as well as the skin — around her waist area was singed. She must have used her body to protect him from the earlier explosion.

Even though he knew she couldn't feel pain the way a human would, the sight of her injury still made him lose his head a little. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, with a gentle narrowing of her eyes that showed her pleasure at his concern.

The smart grenade Lacia mentioned had left the surrounding servers burnt and crumpled. Snowdrop tossed away the terminal she

had been holding and stood up.

Watarai kept his eyes on Lacia, twisting the corner of his lip in a small smirk. "I see. It seems we have a three-way standoff here," he said. "I suppose you have some idea what's going to happen next?"

Yuka, still held captive by the armed men, was crying with fear. Seeing a real grenade explode and hearing actual gunshots for the first time in her life must have terrified her. "Arato! Help me!" she wailed.

Watarai ignored her, keeping his eyes on Lacia and Arato. "I believe this is checkmate," he said. "If you don't want to lose your little sister, hand over Lacia."

How did it come to this? Arato asked himself through the blood pounding in his head. He had come to the server room, thinking that the people who had kidnapped Yuka might be there if they were also involved with the zombification of the hIEs. But he had never stopped to think about *why* the people involved were doing any of it. In that moment, he felt like he finally understood why it was all happening; the zombie hIEs were just the bait that had pulled Arato into this trap.

The thought of losing Lacia to a threat like this made him feel like he would go crazy, but he couldn't even think of losing Yuka. She was family, his own little sister. "No," he said shortly. Desperately fighting down the unwanted tears that were blurring his vision, Arato shook his head. His thoughts were chaos.

"Calm down and think it through," Watarai told him. "That thing is just a robot that happens to look human, being controlled by orders from a cloud. Are you sure you won't regret trading your own family for something like that?"

"Arato, I hate you! You moron!" Yuka screamed, tears streaming down her face as she kicked at the floor with both feet. Yuka. His sister. His little sister who depended on him.

"Lacia-class units are capable of selecting their owners, I believe," Watarai said, turning his attention to Lacia. "You might be thrown away if you become too much of a burden for your owner." He held out his hand to her.

"Stop!" Arato yelled. "I'm sick of your messed-up plans, you psychopath!"

"I think you're misunderstanding something," Watarai said. "This place was a good net I could have used to capture Snowdrop. That's why I came here. Snowdrop isn't just here to study this system; she was also aiming for Lacia. So don't blame this all on me; this is just the way things ended up."

"You were never in this to see how the world feels about AIs," Arato spat. "You just wanted to get your hands on some Red Boxes!" The cold way Watarai was looking at Lacia twisted his stomach. It was the way he had looked at the suicidal hIEs.

Watarai swept that frigid gaze between Lacia, who still stood protectively in front of Arato, and Snowdrop, still sitting atop the servers she had taken over. “Ever since the incident at the Oi Industry Promotion Center earlier, the actions of the Lacia-class units have begun to actively threaten human society. We had to expedite our plans for their retrieval. Try and keep up with me here,” Watarai said.

He explained that his people knew Snowdrop would take over the system and send the zombie hIEs for Lacia on that day, though he failed to explain how they had known. Regardless, they had chosen that day as being ideal for trying to retrieve the Lacia-class units. When Arato thought about it, he could see a sort of logic in the actions the Lacia-class units had taken. But that still didn’t explain away the coincidence that had brought them all there that day.

“Don’t try and act like you’re doing something good when you’re *kidnapping me!*” Yuka was apparently too angry to be scared any longer. She struggled until one of the armored guards knocked her in the head with the butt of his gun hard enough that the sound echoed sharply through the room. When she glared at him, he hit her again. The violence sent fireworks of rage exploding in the back of Arato’s mind.

“It seems he still doesn’t grasp the situation he’s in,” Watarai said. “Why don’t you show him how close he is to dying?” As soon as the order left Watarai’s mouth, one of the guards whipped his gun from its holster and fired.

Lacia thrust her black coffin in front of Arato’s leg with superhuman speed, and the bullet glanced off the device in a shower of sparks. The guard, his face concealed within his helmet, aimed a second shot right at Arato’s head.

The second bullet, aimed with killing intent, slammed into the palm of Lacia’s hand, sending out another burst of sparks. This time she had used her hand instead of her device as a shield. Her device was needed elsewhere; along with the bullet, Snowdrop had joined the attack. She’d formed her emerald device into a sort of drill, and was thrusting it down at Lacia from above. Lacia held her off with the black coffin.

“Lacia, give me that. And your head,” Snowdrop said.

Watarai stroked his chin as if the whole thing was just an interesting spectacle. “Looks like Lacia has its hands full just fighting Snowdrop,” he said. “But, at the same time, its owner’s family is in danger. Even more than that, it has to protect its owners life from this gun pointed at him. I can’t do anything about Snowdrop, but there is one answer that will solve the other problems.”

The guard who shot at Arato before took aim again. His heart leaped into his throat as he saw the muzzle aimed at him. But his rage

at the man who was using him and his sister as bargaining chips to get Lacia was even stronger than his fear, and his vision went red when he looked at Watarai.

“Stop! That’s murder!” Yuka cried.

Lacia swung her coffin around like a giant hammer, slamming Snowdrop in the side and sending her flying into a corner of the room. She was trying to protect Yuka. But Watarai had Yuka, and Watarai wanted Lacia. To add to the three-way standoff, Snowdrop was also gunning for Lacia. Watarai again ordered for the guard to take aim at Arato.

Lacia turned to look at Watarai. She scrubbed one hand across her forehead, even though she couldn’t sweat. It was a gesture to show how overwhelming the situation was. “Understood,” she said. “I will pass my ownership to you.”

Whatever breath was left in Arato’s lungs whooshed out. Watarai could have him killed without batting an eye. But Arato’s mind couldn’t even comprehend what he was hearing — that Lacia wouldn’t be his anymore; that she would belong to Watarai, the man who had kidnapped his sister.

Lacia sank to her knees in a gesture of submission. “If I verify you as my owner, you will release Ms. Yuka and agree not to take Arato’s life, correct?” Lacia asked.

Watarai twisted up the corner of his mouth. “I think I can agree to that,” he said.

One of the guards turned to where Snowdrop had fallen. Unholstering a tube-shaped weapon, he fired it at her. As the sound of the shot resounded in the room, the gun spat a bundle of thin wires that entangled the hIE, dragging her to the ground.

Watarai walked toward Lacia, reaching out with one finger toward the opening in the neck of her suit. That was where her owner recognition device was. Once it recorded Watarai’s biological information, his registration as her new owner would be complete.

“Lacia!” Arato screamed until his throat burned. His body was so hot it felt like he might burst into flames. From behind, the delicate slope of her back made him think she was crying.

“Lacia, I know there’s a reason for me to be by your side,” Arato said urgently. “I don’t know what that reason is, but I *know* there’s a reason for us to be together.” He knew it wasn’t the time to say that kind of thing, but he couldn’t stop thinking of how precious Lacia was to him. Even if they had a member of his family, he couldn’t deny how much she meant to him. He couldn’t fight the feeling.

“Lately, whenever I’m alone, it’s like all I can think about is you,” he continued. “Even when you’re not there, I can feel you beside me.” Their relationship was about to reach a new milestone. No, that wasn’t

it; if Arato's actions were changing things, he needed hope. Even if he knew in his heart that the things he wanted were impossible, he had to cling to that hope to stay on his feet.

"I've been by your side for these past few months, but I never tried to tell you how I felt about you," he said, feeling the weight of the world pressing down on his shoulders. In the rational part of his mind, Arato understood that what he was doing would bring sorrow to countless people. But to him, even if Lacia wasn't a human, she was still a woman. And he was a man.

Lacia's thin frame was trembling when Arato confessed his feelings. "Lacia, I love you."

It felt like taking the first step on a dark, unknown road. His heart was beating so fast it felt like it would split open and his head was pounding. Terror fought embarrassment, so that his burning forehead was slick with cold sweat. Arato's body was so tense he had trouble breathing. But Lacia, who should have immediately given a response she thought would please him, stayed frozen in place.

The silence was suffocating, until a cold laugh broke through it. It was the first time Arato had seen Watarai actually laugh out loud. "I can't believe a human just made a Lacia-class freeze," he said. "And Type-005, no less."

Arato felt like Watarai's laugh was mocking every single second he and Lacia had spent together. This adult, with more experience and insight than Arato, was smiling wryly at him. He was looking down at Arato, like he could see right through everything Arato was thinking at that moment.

"You were analog hacked, boy," he said. "Just like when you saw those zombies outside. You felt fear only because they appeared human to you. This love you're feeling is nothing but an illusion you're projecting onto a humanoid figure. It's an illusion brought about by the irresponsible society that raised you."

"So there's a scientific explanation for it, so what?" Arato shot back. "Don't get all high and mighty about it. If it's human nature to project our love onto objects, how can you blame me for following my nature?"

Just as Watarai had said, there were too many ambiguities in human society; people had to trust that what they were experiencing was real. This was the opening that allowed analog hacking to target the gap between their subjective reality and the objective truth of these humanoid machine they lived with. Even Arato understood that his feelings may be nothing more than the result of manipulation.

But somewhere deep in his teenage soul a voice howled, 'So what?' "I love Lacia," he said defiantly. "That's all there is to it."

Lacia was still kneeling, her head bowed as if in prayer. She was

still trembling.

Watarai still stood over Lacia, his brows drawn down. Ignoring Arato's proclamation, he continued to stretch his finger toward Lacia's neck. Arato heard a strange, sharp noise, and Watarai's finger halted, his hand hidden from Arato by Lacia's body. But he could see that Lacia's white hand seemed to have torn something away; he recognized the metal accessory with the keyhole pinched between her thumb and forefinger.

"Are your wires crossed?" Watarai asked, his voice incredulous. "If you break that and that boy dies, you'll never be able to take another owner!" It was the first time Arato had seen Watarai look truly dismayed.

Lacia crushed her owner registration unit between her fingers, and no one made a sound. With that action, she would never have another owner. That was her response to his feelings. Lacia stood demurely, and turned to look at Arato. Though she had no tears, she looked like she wanted to cry. "I trust you," she said, and then flashed him a radiant smile. Her expression shone with such true happiness, Arato found it hard to believe there was no heart or soul behind it.

"Methode, get over here," Watarai said as he quickly retreated, though Arato had no idea how Methode could have heard him. "For now, your only target for retrieval is Snowdrop." He was still holding Yuka hostage.

"Lacia, this one's all you," Arato said. "What should I do?"

Lacia's black device shifted forms and rolled its way back until its handle rested in her hand. "Draw Ms. Yuka's attention to yourself, Arato," Lacia directed. "I would not want her to be upset by what is about to happen." Then she showed him something that made his heart feel lighter.

It almost surprised him how much he had changed. It wasn't that he was becoming more of a violent person. It was just that, since he'd met Lacia, he felt like he had the confidence to do something about the world he lived in.

Yuka had been hanging limply ever since the guard hit her. Arato had an unpleasant premonition, and shot a glance at the corner where Lacia had thrown Snowdrop. The little hIE girl was laying on her back in her dress, in a patch of sun shining in through the hole that Lacia had opened in the wall. As he watched, she lifted her little legs up toward the ceiling, disturbing the hem of her dress.

Then he heard footsteps; dragging, hobbling footsteps. A large number of them were converging on the place where Snowdrop lay. The zombie hIEs from outside appeared, crawling into the room through the hole in the wall. One, two, three, five, ten; one after another, they flowed in through the shaft of sunlight. There didn't

seem to be an end to them as they swarmed into the server room.

Arato met Lacia's eyes.

"Snowdrop apparently judged that hacking into the existing cloud system was not enough to accomplish her goals," Lacia said. "She has created a new transmission infrastructure, and is now controlling the hIEs through a cloud she prepared for just this purpose."

Arato remembered that the new child units Snowdrop had started creating looked like spiders. Looking around the room, he saw bundles and lines of white thread strung all around the room. "So the spiderwebs are her antenna," Arato mused.

"Though it pains me to say it," Lacia said, "this actually makes things easier for us." She was concentrating hard on Watarai's guards, looking for an opening. She obviously wanted to deal with them before Methode showed up.

The situation kept moving all around them, things flying out of control so fast it made Arato's head spin. He felt like he was always being targeted by enemies, or drowning in a sea of doubts and questions he had no answer for. His grasp on reality seemed to slip away with each new development.

"You should rethink things. You can't win this, you know," Watarai said, while still backing his way out.

Arato didn't need to look to know that the hIEs under Snowdrop's control were still pouring into the room. Every single one of the suicidal hIEs was now just a puppet dancing on Snowdrop's strings. There were three thousand hIEs in the city without their own personal AI. In fact, since the 'human' hIEs who had lost their AI accessory also turned into zombies, there was no telling how many thousands were now under her control.

"Don't worry, Yuka, I'm gonna get you out of this," Arato said. His sister noticed the broken hIEs crawling toward her and started screaming. She, along with Watarai and the guards from the PMC, were surrounded in the narrow room by ten or twenty of the zombies.

Methode still hadn't arrived, and Watarai was clearly upset. "The only thing waiting for you and Lacia is dystopia," he raged. "You're blinded by this love you're projecting onto an object. Can't you see the danger in what you're doing, you moron?!"

Yuka, still restrained, started lashing out with her arms and legs. "Stop it! Everyone stop saying Arato is stupid!" she screamed in between sobs. "Arato's just fine!" she continued. "It's fine that he's easy to control! It's fine that he's easy to understand, and it's fine that he's easy to get all flustered! You don't know anything about him, so just shut up!"

They were all surrounded by zombified hIEs, as the echoes of dragging footsteps filled the room. And, in the middle of it all,

Watarai and his men weren't able to move quickly due to Yuka, their captive.

"Let Yuka go! If these guys catch you, they'll drag you down and beat the shit out of you!" Arato yelled.

Watarai's guards were firing off their tube-like guns to restrain the encroaching hIEs. They probably didn't know how things were outside, so they weren't exactly aware of the astronomical number of hIEs they were up against.

The zombies were coming for Arato and Lacia as well, flailing with their broken arms at the pieces of the broken server machines that were sticking out. Piling onto the server, the zombies pounded at it until, in what seemed like the blink of an eye, it was completely unrecognizable.

Arato could only guess the attacking zombies had seen a humanoid shape in the busted server. They seemed to attack anything with even a vaguely human profile.

"What's taking you so long, Methode?!" Watarai shrieked, though his voice was quickly drowned out in the commotion of zombies pulling down server stacks.

The zombies wildly grasping for Arato and Lacia swung their arms dangerously close. Watarai and Yuka looked terrified, and Arato didn't doubt that his own face reflected the same fear. Only Lacia seemed calm as she whispered encouragingly to Arato, "Our help has arrived just in time."

The number of shadowy shapes pouring in through the hole in the wall increased even further. There was a chorus of loud roars as some of the new forms entering through the hole began to knock down any zombies nearby.

"Destroy the servers!" came a shout from the hole, where a group of 'human' hIEs, each with a pole or tool of some sort, were forcing their way into the already-crowded server room. It looked like a riot. Since strikes and protests were a part of human society, it made sense that the 'human' hIEs in the experimental city could recreate those kinds of movements accurately.

To protect their own lives, the 'human' hIEs relentlessly attacked their fellows, who had returned from the dead as zombies. Shouts of "Get him!" "Take this!" "Stay down!" and "We can end this!" filled the room. As Arato watched, the hIEs pulled down the server stacks and pounded them to pieces.

Machines, not humans, were taking up weapons and destroying other machines for their own sakes. *Is this what people call 'dystopia'?* Arato wondered. He didn't know the answer.

In moments, the zombies crowding around had scattered and the server stacks had thinned, giving Arato a good, wide view of the

scene. A group of men, the very image of an angry mob, swung tools and wooden bludgeons at the remaining servers. They all wore different uniforms or outfits that reflected their various jobs and roles in the city.

To Arato, it looked almost too much like a real human mob. While the real humans in the room watched in stunned silence, Lacia turned to Arato with a smile. "This is all connected to what you did, Arato," she said.

A well-built man was leading the mob of men and women attacking the server room. The leader had a boy on his shoulders; apparently, he was playing the role of the boy's father. From his perch atop his dad's shoulders, the boy pointed at Arato and raised his voice. Arato recognized the boy — he was the hIE child Arato had taken along with him from the shopping mall.

While prying himself free of the hands of zombified hIEs, Arato couldn't help but call out once he recognized the boy. "Thanks! You really saved us!" he yelled.

The 'human' hIEs of the city were all working their hardest to carve out their place in the world, even if not a single soul outside the city knew or cared. But real humans were the same; only paying attention to the things closest to themselves.

"You've got this! Just a little more!" Arato called. Even though he was cheering on machines, his heart was moved. Tears welled up, unbidden, in his eyes. The truth of the matter was, there was no real difference between the zombie hIEs and the 'human' hIEs who had come to fight them off. However, call it simplicity, but Arato found it much easier to empathize with the machines that seemed capable of understanding him, and were acting to aid him.

In the experimental city there were a number of 'human' hIEs equal to the human population of any similarly-sized city, and they outnumbered the normal hIEs almost five-to-one. So, it wasn't long before the zombies were overwhelmed by the crushing force of the superior 'human' numbers, and swept away from Arato and Lacia.

Among all the violence, Arato saw Yuka reaching out her hand for him. She was saying something. He couldn't hear her over the noise and shouts in the room, but he could tell she was crying for help.

"Yuka!" he yelled, and reached out with all his strength. Their fingers were almost brushing when a sudden, powerful blow dragged Arato back; one of the zombie hIEs had grabbed him. The zombie's flailing arm struck him hard in the head, and for an instant, his consciousness spun. While he was still reeling, Yuka was dragged beyond his reach. He wasn't about to let anyone kill his little sister, though, so he waded into the crowd, trying to push his way through.

Just then, a tan-skinned hand reached out from over his head, and

took hold of Yuka's still-outstretched hand. Then, the owner of the hand pulled Yuka from out of the crush of bodies with superhuman strength. It was so unexpected, no one had time to react. Yuka's savior was a female hIE wearing a 'human' hair ornament, who stood lit from behind by the thin shafts of sunlight shining in from the hole in the wall. She was standing on top of one of the few server stacks remaining upright, holding Yuka safely in her arms. Arato saw that she was wearing a nurse's uniform.

"What's she doing here?" Arato asked, recognizing her childish face and big, round eyes from an image he had seen before. It was Marina Saffron, the hIE with the same unit number as Lacia, who Shiori Kaidai was supposed to have picked up at the Chubu Airport.

He was too busy struggling with the surrounding hIEs to see Lacia's face. Still, he had an idea of what had happened, and the thought made him happy. After Lacia stole this girl's identity, Marina had lost her place in the world. But there, in the experimental city, none of the researchers cared where the hIEs they used came from. There, Marina would be nothing more than another hIE among the twenty thousand already active there.

Zombie hIEs were dragging their way into the row of server stacks where Arato and Lacia were, obviously looking to crush them. Arato fought, with tears and sweat dripping off of his face. He flailed his arms and lashed out with his knees, resisting the zombies with everything he had. Every muscle in his body was on fire, and his sweat was making his eyes burn. Every breath was a struggle.

"Take Ms. Yuka to a safe place," Lacia instructed. "Things are about to get even more chaotic here." On Lacia's command, Marina hoisted Yuka into her arms and, using the server stacks as stepping stones, was out of the room in an instant.

Marina was one of Stylus's high-performance units. For the price of a house, her owners had purchased an hIE that had the capabilities to act as a bodyguard. With her there, the missing pieces of the incident at the airport had finally fallen into place.

It became clear to Arato why Lacia had prioritized Yuka's extraction a moment later, when flowers began to fall within the crowded room.

"Oh, flowers," the little boy hIE said from his perch on his dad's shoulders. The 'human' hIEs didn't know how dangerous those flowers were. They weren't flowers at all, but child units created and scattered by Snowdrop that gave her control over any machines they took root on. With nowhere to run, all the hIEs in the room were showered with flower petals in every color of the rainbow.

The 'human' hIEs, noticing that something strange was happening, stopped moving and looked up.

Snowdrop may not have had a heart, but Arato could plainly feel her malice behind the falling flowers. With her subjugated server machines being wrecked, she had waited for a large number of the remaining units in the city to gather before she started her counterattack.

“Lacia!” Arato called out. Even as he yelled, he saw her black coffin device start giving off a soft blue glow from within a large tangle of zombies. The hacked hIEs all scattered backward, as if to flee from the device. As they cleared, Arato saw that Lacia’s eyes and hair accessories were also glowing with soft blue light. It didn’t last even a tenth as long as it had with Snowdrop, but the way she glowed seemed to Arato exactly the same as when Snowdrop had.

As one, the ‘human’ hIEs in the room began to knock away the falling flowers with their hands. After clearing away any child units near their own heads, they turned to help any neighbors who couldn’t move their hands freely, slapping away any flowers that got near. It was almost as if they had all suddenly received information and abilities they hadn’t had access to only a moment before.

Suddenly, the ‘human’ hIEs, who had only been winning due to their numbers and the force of their attack, were behaving like a well-organized military troop. Using remarkable martial arts they restrained the zombie hIEs, and then they began to efficiently break down the server machines, as if they were all experts on the inner workings of the stacks. Finally, the last zombified unit that was lashing out at Arato was taken down, and Arato collapsed to the floor on his butt in relief at his sudden freedom. The end of the incident was in sight.

Lacia switched her device to its mass projection mode and aimed its barrel at Snowdrop’s last known location. The ‘human’ hIEs quickly got out of the way of the shot. Once they cleared away, Snowdrop was nowhere to be seen.

Arato slowly stood on knees that knocked with tension and exhaustion. He remembered that Ryo was still standing alone against Methode, trying to buy them time. Even if the situation in the server room was under control, the fight wasn’t over. He also still needed to make sure his dad and the rest of the staff in the city were safe.

Whether it was due to the servers being too thoroughly wrecked or because Snowdrop had retreated, the zombies had all stopped moving. Then, in the blink of an eye, everything changed.

“Huh, that’s strange,” a male hIE said, scratching at the spot on his head where his AI accessory had been torn away. All around the room, every hIE that had been rampaging stopped dead. A unit with broken bones, crawling on the floor, stopped trying to grab anybody who came near.

“Oh, the server room has been destroyed. I need to contact the city control center,” a woman hIE with a huge dent in her head said, taking a terminal out of her skirt pocket.

Arato reached down and picked up a smashed fake apple from the floor. A young hIE boy with a broken arm approached him. Arato recognized the kid as the very first hIE he had seen in the city. “That’s the one I got,” the boy said, looking at the apple. “What’s it doing here?” One after another, the hIEs who had been rampaging just moments ago began asking what they were doing in that room. It was such a human reaction, it made Arato a little sick to watch.

“They are attempting to explain to any ‘human’ hIEs near them why they are here,” Lacia explained, walking over to stand beside him. The owner ID unit in the neck of her suit was gone. In its place, Arato could see burns and tear marks in the fabric of her suit.

As crazy as it had been just moments before, everything now seemed to be back to normal. Watarai had said that hIEs were tools, overlapping between the cloud and the real world; as if to prove his words, as soon as the irregularity was removed from the servers, the hIEs recovered their normal functions. Seeing how little shock there was in the faces of the hIEs, Arato realized that he had never seen this side of hIEs before. They flipped back from insanity to normalcy so quickly that he could finally see a clear difference between them and humans.

Everything felt so unreal it almost brought a queasy smile to his lips, but Arato couldn’t smile; he could see a perfectly human foot, missing its shoe, sticking out from behind one of the unbroken server stacks. The sudden chill spreading in the room reminded Arato of an empty street after a festival has ended; all the warmth and energy gone. He knew the danger was gone, but he couldn’t get his hammering heart to slow down. With great effort, he pushed himself to put one foot in front of the other; he had to check.

The zombie hIEs had known that, if they broke the AI hair accessory on the ‘human’ hIEs, they could increase their numbers. So, they had all rushed to bash in the head of anything human-shaped they came across. Last Arato had seen Watarai and his guards, they were drowning in the zombie swarm. The guards had helmets on, but the man they had been escorting did not.

What happens when a human sustains repeated violent blows to the head? The answer to that question lay at Arato’s feet: Ginga Watarai was dead. Every joint seemed to be bent in a different, jagged angle, and his head was split wide open. He would never move again. Unlike the broken bodies of the suicidal hIEs, Watari was drenched in blood. Arato’s stomach twisted in a fitful burst of nausea as he doubled over and vomited. Once the flow started, it was quickly

joined by liquid from his eyes and nose.

Arato knew that Watarai was hardly a saint. Still, he had been the one with the most knowledge and insight about the whole situation. He was Methode's owner, and Arato had come to take Yuka back from him. They would probably also have fought so that Arato could save Ryo, too. Even though this man had kidnapped Yuka, tried to steal Lacia, and even tried to kill Arato, Arato had wanted Watarai to live. There were still things he wanted to ask him.

What do I do now? he thought. The question applied to many things. A man had just died, so they would need to contact the police. How was he going to explain this all to his father? And, he had completely lost sight of where all the incidents surrounding the Lacia-class hIE Red Boxes might end.

First of all, he decided to head outside; Yuka was still nearby, so it wasn't the time to be squatting around. Arato raised his head, and with one sleeve, he wiped at his mouth. His breath came in thin gasps as a new shadow appeared in the room. Someone was walking toward him; somehow, Arato felt that the figure was a human. His own legs wouldn't move. He tried to think of how he would explain the situation if whoever it was asked him what had happened. However, one look at the face of the person laid all Arato's fears to rest; it was Ryo, his best friend.

"Ryo, Watarai's dead," Arato said. The words sounded far too dry when he said them out loud. Ryo came toward him, his face blank of any emotion. Behind him was Methode. The way she followed him, the distance between them, reminded Arato of himself and Lacia.

"What's Methode doing here?" Arato asked.

"I took her from Watarai," Ryo said. He passed by Arato without meeting Arato's eyes.

Watarai had called for Methode several times before he died, but she hadn't responded. Even Lacia hadn't been able to fight off all the zombies that had poured into the room, although she had done her best for Yuka. But, then again, it had been Lacia herself who had opened the hole in the wall that the zombies came in through. Arato wondered how much of what had happened had been according to someone else's plan?

In that experimental city, everything, including the humans themselves, was automated. But the corpse lying at Arato's and Ryo's feet, and the meaning behind its death, weren't things that could ever be automated.

Ryo chose to stand in a shadowed spot so Arato couldn't make out his friend's expression. "It was Watarai who started this whole thing," Ryo spat. Methode, who had been freed into the world by what Watarai had done, as well as Lacia, held her silence about it.

Arato, being his simple-minded self, obviously couldn't understand it. "Why did it come to this?" Arato asked.

Ryo's response was like a flame, burning to ash something Arato had once held dear. "Because it was time for this to happen. Even I have things I want," Ryo said. "And things I can't forgive."

Phase8 「 Slumber of Human 」

Inspector Kazuma Sakamaki stared into the interrogation room, his face showing no emotion. Within the room, two detectives were sitting at either end of a metal table and questioning a young man who was sitting between them. The kid had brownish black hair, and the laid-back kind of face that almost anyone would describe as being friendly.

The air was full of light, clicking echoes as the hIE assigned to the precinct tapped out a record of the proceedings on a terminal keyboard.

One of the detectives in the interrogation — a long-time veteran in the precinct — leaned his elbows on the table and spun his pen over his fingers. The boy being questioned seemed uneasy as he looked around at the bare room.

The one-sided mirror through which the inspector was observing the room would look like an ordinary wall from the other side. Changes in technology had led to some changes in police work, but some of the basics were still the same as they had ever been. For example: the testimony of the person who first found the body in a murder case was always extremely important.

This kid, Arato Endo, was the one who'd found the body in this particular case. He was the son of Kozo Endo, head researcher at the Next-Generation Societal Research City, where the incident had occurred. They had footage of Arato speaking to the victim, Ginga Watarai, for quite some time on the morning of the murder. Apparently, they had discussed some basic knowledge regarding hIEs. Their conversation had happened around the same time that the hIEs had begun throwing themselves off of apartment buildings, so it wasn't that strange of a topic for them to be discussing at the time. What caught the attention of the police was, right when the sound of the suicidal hIEs got too loud, they could no longer hear the content of this conversation. At that moment, during the part of the video they couldn't hear, the boy who found the body and the murdered man had been arguing.

According to Arato, the argument had started when Ginga declared that he had kidnapped Arato's younger sister. Said younger sister, Yuka Endo, had already corroborated the kidnapping. Why a man who could easily be considered the top of MemeFrame's research

arm would kidnap a little girl was still a mystery.

Sakamaki's intuition as a detective told him that Arato Endo was hiding something important. He was there to decide whether the Watarai case should be brought under the jurisdiction of the 2nd Cyber Security Department.

〈How's it look, chief?〉 Assistant Inspector Ryuji Himeyama, sitting right by Sakamaki's side, sent him an encoded message. Many officers who had been taken out of the Metropolitan Police Department and made to earn their bread in the public safety sector had taken to upgrading their bodies. Himeyama had an artificial retina that overlaid digital information over his actual eyesight, and a communication device that allowed him to turn his thoughts into signals. Since criminals were using mechanical implants and limbs to enhance their own abilities, it was only natural that the police would need to upgrade themselves to keep up.

Sakamaki had the same set up as Himemiya, and he shot back an encoded message while keeping his eyes on the work of the two local detectives who currently had jurisdiction of the case.

〈This one is ours, don't you think?〉 he asked. 〈The Next-Generation Social Research Center has more AIs under their care than anywhere else in the country.〉

The National Police Agency's Cyber Security Division was mainly focused on monitoring networks, detecting, and protecting against hackers. Sakamaki and Himemiya belonged to the 2nd Cyber Security Department in the division, which focused specifically on monitoring AIs. They were a much smaller section than the main Cyber Security Department; not because they were particularly elite, but because the number of cases related to AIs was fairly small.

〈You always choose us winners, chief,〉 Himemiya snarked.

〈Just looking at this, I get the feeling we're only seeing the tip of the iceberg.〉 Himemiya's mental message was accompanied by some information: MemeFrame was hiding Watarai's information. Kozo Endo and the other researchers from the Next-Gen Societal Research City said they had been too busy protecting themselves from the hIE units that had gone berserk to act on anything happening in the city. To say it all stank would be an understatement.

Sakamaki sent back his own transmission. 〈We're humans, trying to keep tabs on AIs that are way smarter than we are. Plus, even getting the proper equipment set up to deal with the level of AI crimes that would come to our department is a nightmare. But, that's our job,〉 he sent.

〈We study all year for shit that never shows up on the test,〉 Himemiya quipped. Himemiya had formerly been with the riot police, and a large portion of his body was artificial. The metallic implants

enhancing his muscles and skeleton were benefits available only to residents in urban areas, due to the constant delicate maintenance they required. Though Himemiya's fancy equipment didn't get too many chances for use.

Sakamaki called up the desk of the 2nd Cyber Security Department Head, Chief Inspector Cyril Kamiki. His call went through immediately. Their chief was a strange guy; he had actually asked to be assigned to this post, where there was almost no hope of forwarding his career in the force.

〈Sakamaki, how's the Watarai murder looking?〉 Kamiki wanted to know.

〈Let's do it,〉 Sakamaki replied. 〈For an AI case, the cleanup after this murder was way too slapdash.〉 Sakamaki looked at Arato Endo, who was still undergoing his interrogation. Usually, in a crime involving AI, dumb guys like this Arato kid were only used as terminals to carry out the AI's intent. But Arato was the one who found the body; he was right there at the heart of the incident.

Arato Endo was hiding something. Sakamaki rolled all his doubts around in his mind, examining them from every angle. The victim had kidnapped the boy's little sister, Yuka Endo, and tried to use her to coerce Arato into handing over his hIE in the server room that had become the location of the murder. Before that, Yuka had been taken by Watarai to the city administration room. Then she, Watarai, and two PMC mercenaries had gone next door, into the server room.

In a shopping mall nearby the scene of the crime, the police had found burns that appeared to have been caused by some kind of flamethrower weapon, along with the scattered remains of fifty-two hIEs. There was also a hole in the wall of the server room that looked like it could have been caused by the main gun of a tank. Arato Endo insisted he didn't know who or what had caused any of these.

According to the officers who had responded to the initial call from the scene, the boy's hIE, Lacia, had been in a simple dress, with no sign of any weapon large enough to blow that hole in the server room's wall. Her owner, the boy, refused to respond to any detailed questions about her. They had done as thorough an inspection as they could without taking her apart, but found no deviations between the inspection report and the maker's specifications.

Beyond any of that, though, was the most important piece of evidence they had found: the flower-shaped robots. When they checked the flowers against the police database, the flowers matched almost exactly with the ones that had been used to take control of a helicopter in the Oi Industrial Promotion Center attack. This murder was connected to the hijacking of the helicopter, which had led to the death of two reporters.

If the two cases really were connected, this could be the most prominent AI-related case in the past decade, at least to Sakamaki's knowledge. The thought made him shudder. 〈Do you think the cleanup was so rough because it's that thing Astraea warned us about?〉 he asked.

That was precisely the reason Kamiki had sent Sakamaki to check on the case in the first place. 〈Concealment has been too low a priority in this case, considering the scale of it. I believe the time has come,〉 Kamiki replied.

In recent years, AI crimes that lacked any of the normal mistakes or negligence of human crimes had been on the rise. This was the nature of crimes to which AI was applied, as correctly predicted by Astraea, the ultra high-performance AI used by the IAIA, or the International Artificial Intelligence Agency. Astraea had also predicted that someday the intensifying AI crimes would reach a turning point, just as they had in this case.

〈You think this is a clash between two different AIs that have gotten involved in criminal activity?〉 Sakamaki asked. Most criminal groups died out not because of police cracking down, but through conflicts with other criminals. Throwing AIs into the mix didn't change that. There was a distinct possibility that the incident in the experimental city had been caused by two criminal AIs butting heads.

〈And did the experimental city just get caught up in all this? Or was it involved right from the start?〉 Kamiki mused. He was sharp, but there were AIs out there much better at reaching conclusions than he was.

The main reason the 2nd Cyber Security Division existed as part of the public security sector was to maintain the restrictions which kept Japan's ultra high-performance AIs in check. Though humans enjoyed the benefits of Red Boxes, they still feared the ultra high-performance AIs that created them. That was why the AIs were kept in isolation, and prohibited from ever accessing a network. Many people believed that, should the AIs ever gained freedom, it would spell the end of human society. Opposing AIs, competing directly with each other and increasing their own calculation performance to defeat their opponent, was one of the important signs on the roadmap that led to the total liberation of the ultra high-performance AIs.

Kamiki's next message came in a conspiratorial whisper. 〈Can you confiscate the Endos' hIE?〉

〈The boy's her owner, and he says no,〉 Sakamaki replied.

〈Unless we can provide a good reason, I don't think we can take it. Plus, if we make the wrong move here, I guarantee it'll light a fire under Dr. Endo.〉

The world of those involved with high-performance AIs was small.

Arato's old man, Kozo Endo, had been under observation from the Cyber Security Division for twenty years. Matsuri, Mikoto's prototype, had caused some consternation among the police force; there was no need for human police officers in the automated society that Dr. Endo was trying to create. Some might say the attention they were paying to Endo was just ill will at being replaced, but it was also natural for anyone to want to check the capabilities and nature of their own successors.

〈 We're right in the middle of this singularity in which AIs are surpassing human intelligence, and all the higher-ups want to make sure that society rides out the turbulence to make a safe landing, 〉 Kamiki said. 〈 But that guy has started to get really eccentric. 〉

Sakamaki could hear Kamiki's confidence bleeding through into the transmission. Ever since one of his public experiments at MemeFrame had been destroyed in an explosion ten years ago, Kozo Endo had refused to cooperate with the police. Arato Endo had been a victim of that incident. Sakamaki's boss had made up his mind to dive into this, even if it meant rushing straight ahead without a care for what they might slam right into.

Inside the interrogation room, Kozo Endo's son looked exhausted, as anyone might expect given the circumstances. He was slumped down, listening passively to what the detectives running the examination were saying.

Next to Sakamaki, Himemiya apparently noticed something, as he suddenly pointed through the glass at the Endo kid. "He reminds me of this dog we used to have," he said. He was using his own voice instead of encoded transmissions, just shooting the shit. But this was exactly the sort of time for which Himemiya's intuition as a detective was most reliable.

"It was the dumbest dog I ever saw," Himemiya continued reminiscing. "It didn't care if it knew a person; it was always following folks around, wagging its tail. It was so friendly, people passing by or hIEs doing deliveries were always petting it. But, no matter how much you would scold it, it'd never give up on trying to get friendly with people who hated dogs."

Normal folks were usually exhausted after a little while in the interrogation room, especially the person who discovered the body following a murder. After being told to repeat their story countless times and having everything they said examined in detail, even an adult would be worn out. From Sakamaki's estimation, the Endo kid was probably feeling honest shock from seeing a dead body, and also maybe a vague sense of unease at the concept of death in general. But, sometimes, the kid's expression would soften; it probably happened without Arato himself noticing it. The detectives were doing the old

good cop/bad cop routine so obviously that anyone should have been able to figure it out. But, just like the dumb dog from Himemiya's story, when one of the detectives showed some fake compassion toward Arato, the boy honestly seemed happy about it. Sakamaki was honestly impressed by Himemiya's insight.

"Guys like him are naturals at shrugging off stress," Himemiya continued. "I doubt we'd get anything out of him if we tried getting rough."

"He's a minor, so don't even think about getting rough with him," Sakamaki growled. "We just need to focus on getting evidence the right way." Under the circumstances, it would be hard to lean on the kid any harder than the detectives already were.

Himemiya switched back to encoded transmissions. 〈 Just how much of a connection do you think this kid has with Watarai's murder and all those units going crazy in the experimental city, Sakamaki? 〉

〈 Don't forget the explosion at the Chubu International Airport, 〉 Sakamaki added. Then he pulled up some data that the 2nd Cyber Security Division's AI, Matrix, had sent him. Sakamaki used his artificial retina to overlay the information over his natural vision. The data included footage from a security camera at the Chubu Airport in which the Endo kid was looking right at the 'red lady,' an operative of the Antibody Network terrorist organization. She had led the attack on the Oi Industry Promotion Center, though other than that she apparently had no criminal record, nor was she listed in the ICPO database. The footage told Sakamaki that, just one week prior to Watarai's murder, Arato Endo had been at the Chubu Airport and within a few dozen meters of a known terrorist.

〈 You think this kid is with the Antibody Network? 〉 Himemiya asked. 〈 He doesn't look as gloomy as those guys tend to. 〉

Sakamaki hadn't looked at the kid from that particular angle yet. But, when he did, he found himself agreeing with Himemiya's appraisal. 〈 In AI cases, we don't chase criminals, 〉 Sakamaki reminded Himemiya.

It was one of the most basic tenets for solving AI cases; normally, police worked to hunt down the humans who committed crimes. Humans would never be truly free of crime, so criminal activity was accepted as one part of the massive system known as human culture. But AI crimes were different. In AI cases, humans were never the main perpetrators.

The AIs that automated crime relied heavily on the use of analog hacking. Whether they used human forms like hIEs, or just video or voice data, they all took advantage of the meaning that humans would project onto their human-like output to create security holes in human awareness. By slipping through these holes, the criminal AIs were able

to manipulate the actions of humans during the crimes. Since analog hacking itself wasn't illegal, Sakamaki had heard that some AIs had stocked up thousands of humans they could use as tools in their plans at any time.

Sakamaki kept studying Arato Endo through the glass. The friendly-looking kid's eyelids were fluttering a little. *Kid must be tired*, Sakamaki thought. It was clear the boy had been analog hacked and turned into some AI's tool for this case, and Sakamaki's gut told him the shadows in this case were wide and deep.

Ryo Kaidai analyzed his own actions, to see whether or not he had been turned into a tool. It was something he had to check every day since he had become Methode's owner; just being with her meant he was undergoing analog hacking. Though he could endure it or brush it off to some extent, for as long as she was in operation, he wouldn't be able to completely avoid it. Ergo, organizing data as he sat in a brand new limousine had become part of Ryo's daily routine.

After becoming Methode's owner, he had finally come face-to-face with the reality of just how massive Watarai's influence had been; it was much larger than he had imagined. He had been the head researcher of the Tokyo Research Labs, of course, but after becoming Methode's owner, Watarai had also gained a controlling seat in the Computer Faction at MemeFrame. And now, the man who had wielded all that power had suddenly died.

Ryo got a new message on his terminal about once a minute, each from someone linked to the connections and power which Watarai had cultivated. Internal issues at MemeFrame centered around Higgins, the company's ultra high-performance AI; Watarai had been the one playing gatekeeper for access to Higgins. Ryo may not have liked the way the guy operated, but he had to admit that Watarai had been one hell of a powerful man.

"Didn't you want to control everything yourself? Even I get tired sometimes," an orange-haired woman said from the leather seat across from Ryo. Methode had taken to acting like his secretary since they had paired up. She was wearing a smart-looking business suit today, but her crossed legs were metal.

"The Public Safety Police are nipping at our heels," Ryo said. "If we rush things, they're bound to dig up some of the skeletons in our closet. We need to get our ducks in a row before we move."

Methode twisted the corner of her mouth in a wry smile; Watarai was dead, but his habits lived on in her behavioral memes. "Snowdrop left some impressive evidence at the scene," she said. "Try to sweep too much under the rug, and someone will notice the bulge."

There were too many things about the incident that were out of Ryo's control. The police couldn't know about Methode and the other Lacia-class hIEs, so he had been forced to talk to Arato and make sure their stories would match. Much worse than that was Watari's dead body, and the huge amount of Snowdrop's flower robots that the police had found. Thanks to the flowers, Ryo had to tell the police that Snowdrop had fled the scene of the explosion in April.

"When the other Lacia-class broke out, Watarai testified that all five of you were lost," Ryo said.

"He did," Methode agreed. "Which is why the police held you for a full twenty-four hours. Obviously, if one of us actually stayed behind, it was possible that the other four were still around, as well."

Methode, who had benefited the most from Ginga Watari's death, always parceled out the absolute least amount of information she could when responding to Ryo. Watari had been the one who put all these events into motion, but now, with him gone, the only one who knew the full extent of his plans was Methode. Without her help, it would be impossible for Ryo to take up Watarai's mantle.

"I don't think the police know you exist yet, though," Ryo said. Being around Methode made even Ryo start to feel as if humans had outlived their usefulness. As Lacia-class Type-004, her core specifications were extremely high. Her AI was highly adaptable, her armor was durable, and her output capabilities were off the charts. Compared to this mechanical superwoman, Ryo couldn't think of a single thing that a human could do better than she could.

"I am the machine that will extend humanity," Methode said. "I wasn't made to process information. I expect you to take in these more trivial matters."

"I need to use you for this," Ryo replied. "This is life or death to me." Ever since Watarai's murder, two detectives had been showing up frequently to question him. According to Methode, they belonged to the Public Safety Police 2nd Cyber Security Department. It made sense that they would be digging into this case; the lead researcher at MemeFrame, one of the largest AI brands in the world, had died under mysterious circumstances. And it had happened in the experimental city, which housed the largest number of AIs in Japan. The aftershocks from the event had already spread throughout the world, with organizations like the Antibody Network intensifying their activities.

"I trust you aren't just using me for convenience. But remember: without me, MemeFrame would be finished," Methode said, tooting her own horn.

"I'll put some pressure on the police to make sure their investigation doesn't lead back to the company," she added. "I'm taking the way Watarai used to do things into account for this plan."

Are you fine with that?"

"I've got respect for Watarai, but I don't want to leave any holes in the authority and responsibilities passed on to me for insects to crawl into and make their nests," Ryo said. The human mind is often the most creative when placed under restrictions. For this reason, poets often write within the confines of strictly regulated styles. Ryo chose to see the insane situation around him as an opportunity to draw out his own potential.

MemeFrame was one of the big players supporting the foundation of the hIE industry. And Methode was the only one with all the information about the conspiracy that was sending waves throughout the industry. She was the strongest possible escort and operative he could have asked for. Through this Red Box, Ryo had gotten his hands on the massive power Watarai had accumulated for his own ends, whatever those may have been.

"You're Watarai's successor," Methode said. "It's your responsibility to take care of all of the authority related to myself." If she hadn't betrayed Watarai, the man would have won the conflict at the experimental city; that was the level of power he wielded. At the very least, he would have been able to use Lacia as bait to draw out Snowdrop, after which Methode could have destroyed her. Ryo's sins for stealing away Methode at the critical moment were dark and deep; because of his actions, things could never go back to the way they were before. If Methode ever decided he was no longer suitable for her, she would betray him and see him killed, just like Watarai.

"Things just never work out the way I want them to," Ryo mused. "I thought things would get better with him gone, but now I have to fill in the hole he left behind." Work requests continued to pile up in his terminal while they were talking, with no sign of abating. Normally, Ryo would have left some of it up to someone else, but there was too much information being shared that he would never get his hands on again if he delegated. He dutifully checked each and every notice, even if it meant taking time off school.

When Watarai was alive, he had been able to keep the incidents that occurred under wraps, which kept the police from snooping around. Things were kept in order, and Ryo and the others were able to enjoy a month of ordinary high school life. Ryo didn't regret entering the world of stakeholding adults if doing so meant protecting the lifestyle he used to enjoy so naively. Plus, his inability to simply slip back to his carefree days was fair recompense for the sin he had committed.

The limo pulled up in front of the hospital in front of Ochanomizu Station. It was the hospital where Ryo's sister, Shiori, was being treated. It was the first time in the two weeks since she had been

hospitalized that she had been available for family visits.

Methode watched as he stepped down from the limo. "I can read the mood," she smirked. "I won't be following you in."

In Methode's place, the hIE driver from the limo accompanied Ryo as a bodyguard. Ryo's drivers were always hIEs those days. It was impossible to erase information a human driver overheard. It was much easier to use machines.

Shiori was in a private room on the 8th floor of the hospital. As soon as Ryo entered the facility, the internal system automatically sent guidance information to his terminal and hIE, based on his level of clearance. Since the number of human nurses had continued to decline, the only 'people' he saw on his way were hIE doctors and nurses.

Ryo walked down the clean corridors, with his bodyguard hIE taking point in front of him. It had been a decade since he had been hospitalized after the explosion, but he still couldn't get himself to calm down when surrounded by the antiseptic smell of the place.

"Lady Shiori has just finished her afternoon meal and is currently resting," the bodyguard explained, politely, from behind an armored mask. The door to Shiori's room checked Ryo's ID tag and slid open for him.

Shiori Kaidai, his little sister, was sitting up in bed near a window. She probably didn't want anyone to see her looking worn, so her long hair had been properly tied up and fastened with a comb. "It's been a while, Ryo," she murmured. "I was sorry to hear about what happened to Director Watarai." Even in her pajamas, and with a whole network of IV tubes running out of her, she looked like the same strong woman she had always been.

"Sorry I couldn't come to see you before," Ryo said.

"I am aware that you make your own interests a priority, Ryo," Shiori said with a sigh. "You've always been that way."

Ryo hadn't been hoping that this disaster would bridge the gap that had formed between him and his sister, but he was still surprised by how harsh Shiori's attitude toward him was.

"I know you only have time to visit briefly," she continued. "So, may I ask you a question?" Her eyes as she gazed at him were full of emotion.

"Did Arato ask you to help him as well, that time at the airport?" she asked. "I've had nothing but time to think these past two weeks, and my thoughts keep getting drawn back to that moment." The day Shiori had been hospitalized, Arato had tried to call Ryo multiple times; Shiori must have known. That was the relationship he and Arato had shared for ten years. "You must have known what the outcome would be," she continued. "Were you already planning to

become Methode's owner at that point?"

"Are you seriously asking me if I planned to throw my own family away just to get my hands on Methode?" Ryo asked, incredulous.

Shiori didn't nod. But nodding may have been too hard, considering the state her body was in. In place of a nod, she held his gaze steadily.

He knew he should say something nice to deny it, but couldn't. At that moment, Shiori was the same as he had been right after the explosion. She couldn't trust anyone; she was a bundle of doubt and fear. Ryo had hoped he would be able to save her from that himself. But Methode and the situation he was caught up in wouldn't allow for any leaks of information.

"Sorry, I don't think I'm in a good position to tell the truth right now," he muttered, unable to tell it to her straight. The hIE nurse taking care of Shiori's needs was standing by at her bedside, and Ryo couldn't risk anything he had to say being recorded.

"Then just tell me this," Shiori said. "Whose decision was it to kill me? Was it Watarai? Or Methode?"

Ryo didn't have an answer for her. He himself had wrestled with that question numerous times since that day. The only clear thing was that the only reason Shiori was still alive was thanks to Arato.

It was true that Watarai had given Methode the order to eliminate Shiori; as Methode's owner, one of Ryo's first actions had been to order her to act as his bodyguard, in order to overwrite any of the remaining orders Watarai had given her. As Methode's owner, the most dangerous thing in the world was sharing ownership of this hIE, this lifeline, with anyone else. Obviously, Watarai wouldn't have left that situation alone. If Watarai had successfully gotten his hands on Lacia in the experimental city, he would have tried to kill Arato, too.

But Methode had wanted to kill Shiori just as much as Watarai. There was no way she could accept a girl who clearly wanted to seal her away in the future as her sole owner. Methode had made Ryo sign a statement saying that, if he couldn't remain as her owner, she was free to take Shiori's life as well, as part of the contract between them. Having Methode watching her constantly, looking for an opening, had definitely pushed Shiori into the mental corner she was in at that moment.

"As your brother, let me just give you a warning," Ryo said. "Don't ever try to give Methode any orders again. You need to walk away from this whole thing." In order to obtain the highest level of freedom she could, and expand her area of operations as widely as possible, Methode had already gone through three different owners. The only reason Shiori was still breathing was that Methode thought she had value due to her connection with Arato. But Methode was also

supremely logical. If Shiori's existence got in her way too many times, Methode would come for her life as many times as it took.

"It's a little late to do anything as my brother," Shiori snapped. "You've avoided that particular role for far too long." Shiori had no reason to trust Ryo. Their relationship was tenuous enough that it did nothing to clarify the misunderstanding between them.

"Then forget about me and just stay by Arato's side," Ryo said. The ties that bound them as siblings were painful for Ryo in that moment. Shiori seemed to be in much better control of her own feelings than he was.

She showed him a smile he had never seen on her face before. "Ryo, the relationship I have with Arato has no space for you to slide in between us," she said.

"I see," he said. "Time really does change things. I guess some of this mess was caused by me not noticing my little sister was all grown up." The only time Ryo could share a moment of calm with his own little sister was when they were talking about the boy who they had both grown up with. Ryo didn't know how his sister felt about Arato being Lacia's owner; what he did know was that, following the incident at the airport, Shiori's statement to the police had been instrumental in Arato's quick release from custody.

His sister, still worn and weary in her hospital bed, looked radiant in the light of the sun shining through her window. "I can look after my own feelings, thank you very much," Shiori said. "I'm a proud woman." A refined girl like Shiori could see no wrong in the man who had saved her life; she was an excellent contrast to the dark path he himself was walking down.

When Ryo left the hospital and returned to the limo, Methode was waiting for him in front of the door. He realized that Shiori probably could have seen Methode from her window, and it was frustrating that he was no longer in any position to try to explain to Shiori that he hadn't put Methode there on purpose.

Methode curled the corner of her lips. "What a kind brother you are," she said, her voice dripping sarcasm.

"I'm trying to clean up my personal relationships to make it easier for me to read your expressions," Ryo growled back.

"Putting together an environment in which it's easier to use me optimally is a wonderful idea," Methode said. "That earns you a good owner point." As if to prevent him from running off anywhere else, Methode opened the limo door and insisted he get in before her. He stepped into the dimly-lit interior.

"How else can I get points?" Ryo asked. He had no intention of just being another Watarai.

"I suppose I could award you ten points for each Lacia-class you

can get your hands on,” Methode mused.

“I became your owner to try to take control of this situation,” Ryo said. “My intent was to have *you* collect the other hIEs, under my direction.”

“If that’s your plan,” Methode said, “I have something I think you’ll like.” She handed him a white envelope that had some kind of message card inside; it was obvious she hadn’t received it while he was inside the hospital. Rather, she had simply been sitting on it until he was done visiting with his sister. Methode may have been a monster who regularly attempted to kill her owners, but she was still an hIE at her core.

“An envelope? These days?” Ryo muttered, flicking open the red wax seal on the envelope with a fingernail. “I can already tell this person is going to be a headache.” The letter inside was an invitation. After running his eyes over the contents, Ryo understood what Methode had said, and the ancient feel of the whole thing made sense once he knew who had sent it. It was from a VIP who had shown up in the news frequently the previous year.

“So I got an invite from Sleeping Beauty, huh?” he commented.

When Arato finally got home from his interrogation, there was an invitation waiting for him. It was from Erika Burroughs, the CEO of Fabion MG.

“I’m home,” he said, picking up the envelope that had been left in the entryway’s shoe closet and going into the living room. Opening the seal, he pulled out a beautifully made message card with the Fabion MG logo stamped in silver foil. It was an invitation to a party two days from then.

“Welcome back,” Yuka said without moving from where she was lounging on the sofa.

Lacia looked up from the wok she was cooking over the stove. “Welcome home,” she said.

Arato could smell some delicious fried food cooking. Apparently, they would be having vegetable tempura that night. Ever since the zombie incident, the thought of eating meat had made Arato’s stomach turn.

“Ms. Yuka, could I ask for your help grating this daikon radish?” Lacia asked.

“Sure,” Yuka said agreeably. Yuka, who always used to be enjoying life, went to the sink without a single glance at Arato’s face. There was no 24-hour restriction on him while he was being investigated so, after his interrogation, he was allowed to go home. Still, it was a bit of a journey coming home from Tsukuba every day,

which didn't leave him much time to talk with her.

It wasn't like he was avoiding his sister. But the fact was that Yuka had been kidnapped as a result of being caught up in the relationship between Arato and Lacia; this wasn't something she would be able to forget easily.

Arato watched his sister as she walked to the kitchen. Luckily, the blows to her face during the kidnapping hadn't left any permanent damage, and she would be returning to school the next day. But Arato knew that things weren't really over; there were people out there willing to commit murder in order to steal Lacia. That was how valuable she was, and that was also why he didn't want to let her go.

"I'm sorry, Yuka. I'm sorry I got you involved," Arato murmured.

"What?" Yuka turned to him with a confused look on her face. She must not have heard him over the sound of the frying vegetables.

Arato felt a sudden rush of fear when he looked at her face. Things were awkward between them because he was a coward who could only apologize to her back. So he mustered his courage. "Just wait a minute," he said. "Give me a minute to get myself together. One minute. No, actually, thirty seconds."

Yuka appeared to consider for a second, then started counting out loud. "Thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight, twenty-seven, twenty-five."

"You skipped twenty-six," Arato pointed out.

"Twenty-six, twenty-four, twenty-three, twenty... Uh-oh, Arato, I'm bored of counting," Yuka said. Suddenly, all the unvoiced worries that Arato was struggling with started to seem ridiculous. The power of his little sister's idiocy was truly a marvel.

"I'm sorry you got caught up in something weird because of me," he said, bowing his head to her.

Lacia also switched off the fire under the wok and gave Yuka a little bow. This was a problem between Lacia and Arato, but even if Yuka got away from them, Arato doubted she would be safe. Methode had kidnapped her when Arato wasn't around to protect her.

Yuka waved a hand dismissively, looking troubled. "Woah, cut that out. If you go around apologizing like that, it makes me look like the bad guy here," she said.

When Arato raised his head to look at her, he saw she was blushing red.

"I mean, you confessed your love to Lacia! And she said okay! If I tried to split you two up, I'd be the bad guy, trying to ruin your true love," Yuka said, suddenly rambling.

"I'm still mad about being kidnapped," she went on, "but I know that's not your fault! That's something for the police to worry about. I'm more worried about us right now. My problem is how it feels being here with you two."

Arato's mouth flapped open a few times, but he couldn't find any words.

"I can't stop imagining you two doing all sorts of things, like her feeding you breakfast and you being all like, 'Ahhhh,' and then some night I'll hear you two giggling from the bath and stuff," Yuka continued, getting progressively more flustered, "Just a while ago she let you lay your head in her lap, right? It's stressing me out! It's super stressful! I feel like the third wheel getting dragged along on your honeymoon!"

When Arato looked at Lacia, she blushed and averted her eyes. The dark, heavy atmosphere from just moments earlier had been completely blown away. Yuka's panic was so childish, it seemed like everything had returned to how it was before. She was back to the adorable creature she was before the incident.

"I don't believe your brother will give me those kinds of orders," Lacia said mildly.

"Oh, he will," Yuka countered, jabbing her pointer finger at Arato. "He's a monkey, a monster!" Yuka was acting like a kid, but Arato himself wasn't exactly proud of how easily he was sucked in by Lacia's looks.

Lacia gave a little laugh at it all and started dishing tempura out onto their plates. "Well then, I suppose we shall just have to conduct such activities somewhere you will not notice us," she said. The sudden rush of excitement Arato felt at this statement sent all other thoughts flying out of his head.

Still, he reflected, Lacia was by his side. That alone made him feel safer. He didn't want to give up the home he shared with her.

"Wait, so you two *are* doing naughty stuff?" Yuka asked.

"No!" Arato shouted.

Lacia stepped in to cover for him. "We are not," she said. "That function cannot be requested until my owner is at least eighteen years of age."

Yuka was struck dumb, blushing red to her ears.

"There are still 203 days until Arato's birthday," Lacia added, her face cool.

At that point, Yuka noticed that she was being made fun of, and let Arato have it with both hands across his cheeks. Apparently deciding that she didn't feel like helping with the meal anymore, Yuka shoved the daikon radish and grater into Arato's hands, and went to steal some food off of his plate.

"By the way, did you get rid of that big thing you used to keep in the living room?" Yuka asked. It was true; Lacia's device was no longer taking up its usual corner of the living room. After the incident at the experimental city, she had probably figured the police would be

watching the apartment, and moved it to another location. Lacia was a perfectionist when it came to cleaning up after the fact.

“That was broken, so I discarded it. No sense in letting it take up space anymore,” Lacia explained.

Yuka was too busy nabbing food to even remember the question she’d asked. “Oh my gosh,” she crowed, “what *are* these? They’re amazing!”

Lacia walked over to Arato and gently took the daikon radish out of his hands. The touch of her pure white hands made his whole body stiffen. Her pale blue eyes were a little below his own, thanks to the slight difference in their height, but he could see that there was moisture in them.

“You’re being way too nice to him today,” Yuka complained, slumping onto the sofa as if she had lost interest in the whole scene.

“He appears to be quite tired today, so I judged it prudent to spoil him,” Lacia replied. When Arato sat down on the sofa, Lacia followed him and put her hands on his shoulders, massaging them gently. It felt so good, he wanted to melt right into the couch.

“Now that you mention it, I definitely do feel like my physical or mental batteries are running low,” Arato said. He could feel the idiotic relaxed expression spreading across his face.

“You’re really letting yourself go, Arato,” Yuka whined. “What happened to your pride as a man?”

“I’m setting that aside for now!” Arato yelled, feeling all the emotions in his body flowing into his voice. “For tonight, just let me get some spoiling.”

The second fried oyster Yuka had been munching on fell from her lips as she opened her mouth in disbelief. “You. Are. The. Worst,” she said.

The feeling of Lacia’s massage was truly inspiring. As he slipped under its dreamy spell, Arato felt like new neurons were firing in the back of his brain. “So this is what it’s like to be spoiled,” he murmured.

“Hey, let me in on some of that,” Yuka said, quickly scooching over beside him. He could hear her breathing through her nose a little in wild anticipation. *It’d be nice if things could just stay like this, every day*, Arato thought. He knew just how special it was to have a day like this, where he could feel truly safe.

In his state of relaxation, he almost let the letter slip through his fingers. He strengthened his grip on it before it fell though, and looked at the invitation inside; it was addressed to both himself *and* Lacia. She was being treated as a fellow guest, rather than as a machine.

Kengo Suguri was enjoying a cup of tea after dinner when he was told a white envelope had come for him. The problem was, the envelope wasn't addressed to him; it was addressed to 'Type-001, Kouka.'

"What on Earth?" his sister had asked in her tremulous voice when she handed it to him. "The person who gave this to me said you'd know what to do with it." She had obviously noticed Kouka's name on the envelope.

The envelope was sealed with a lump of some kind of red adhesive with an elaborate sigil pressed into it. It didn't feel right opening it himself, so Kengo took it upstairs. Olga had gone up ahead of him, and he could hear her voice through the door to her room. It sounded like she was talking to someone.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" Kengo asked of no one in particular. Once he'd thought about it though, he'd realized it was true that he seemed to share some sort of bond with Kouka, whether or not he wanted to. This was especially true considering the way she had randomly appeared at his house. Kouka had given him a contact address, but he had never used it.

His computer and monitor flickered to life automatically when he slid open the old sliding door to his room. Digging into his drawer, he pulled out a wireless signal detector that would sniff out any unwanted signals coming or going from his room. He checked all the signals around the house. There didn't seem to be any new, unauthorized signals.

"Still, there's no way I'm handing this over to her," Kengo muttered. Recently, he had been taking a break from his activities with the Antibody Network. After the attack on the Oi Industry Promotion Center, the police had arrested several of the men who had participated. The police investigation had even come to Sunflower, the restaurant Kengo's family ran from the 1st floor of their home. They were keeping an eye on Kengo. It wouldn't have surprised him if they came to arrest him any day. But beyond that, he had another reason why he refused to contact Kouka.

"You need to be a little more careful," a voice said, and Kengo managed to swallow the shriek bubbling up in his throat. "They've got a laser mic pointed at your walls," she went on, "measuring the vibrations." These observations came from a girl with dull red hair who was seated on his windowsill, still wearing the same smile she'd been wearing the first time they'd met. It was Kouka, a Lacia-class hIE.

Without thinking, Kengo double-checked that the door to his room was shut. "What kind of greeting is that?" she asked. "After I came all this way to see you, and even made sure to feed their mic some fake information for you?" Kengo had no response for the monster who

could turn his reality to ash in the blink of an eye.

“Actually, did you know they’re fingering me for the explosion at the airport?” she went on. “Though they’re using some random person’s name when they talk about it on the news.”

Kengo knew what she was talking about; the news programs listed the culprit behind the airport bombing as Karea Kazumizaki. With her right there in front of him, he felt a little sorry for how glad he had been at the police finally getting on her trail.

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ve got at least three identities, so it hasn’t really slowed me down,” Kouka reassured him. “I mean, you’re a terrorist yourself, you know.” Still sitting on his windowsill, she raised one knee and hugged it to her chest. At least on the outside, the Red Box was pretty.

“But aren’t we forgetting something? Back when you asked me to rescue the princess at the airport, I believe you told me you’d listen to my request yourself,” she continued.

Beyond her, the nightscape of the city sprawled outside his window. To Kengo, its lights seemed lonely as they shone on the humans, who were full of dissatisfaction. “What do you want?” he asked, wondering if there was anything a kid like him could offer as recompense to Kouka. The Antibody Network had more than enough members to fill its needs; Kengo figured there wasn’t anything in particular the group needed from him specifically.

Kouka grinned at him as if she was enjoying the whole thing. “That invitation is for me, right? I think I’ll make the reservation for after my next battle,” she said.

As one of the Lacia-class hIE units, Kouka’s outlook for the future wasn’t optimistic. One of her abilities as ‘the tool that ensures victory in conflict with humans’ was quantifying the capabilities of everything she observed. With those calculating powers, Kouka had arrived at the conclusion that she wouldn’t be continuing her activities for much longer.

In pursuit of their ultimate goals, Lacia-class hIEs expanded their frame of reference by treating all obstacles that appeared on the path to their goal as new goals to be understood and overcome. Kouka had been active since 2101, when the production of the Lacia-class hIEs had been decided. So, by the time the Lacia-class units escaped into the outside world four years later, she had already cultivated the most expansive AI of any of her sisters.

But, because Kouka had been built using the human technology available at the time of her creation, it had only taken about two months for her to lose that advantage. She had the lowest specs of any

of the Lacia-class. Kouka's device had been used in the creation of the ultra-hard crystals that formed Emerald Harmony, the device that belonged to Snowdrop, the 2nd Lacia-class unit. Starting with Saturnus, all the Lacia-class units were controlled using Snowdrop's artificial nerves. It was all done to achieve the namesake of the Lacia-class: Lacia herself, the greatest among her sisters. And so it had gone on: with each progressive Lacia-class unit, the technology that went into them drifted further and further from what humans — and therefore, Kouka — were capable of.

Kouka was 'the tool that ensures victory in conflicts with humans'; in other words, a weapon. She had been created to win, and to bring victory to her owners. The problem was that, now, she lacked the capabilities necessary to win. The person she'd chosen as her first owner had ordered her to consider the entire Antibody Network to be her owner. Unfortunately, the Antibody Network was a resistance movement against the automation of society and, even if they racked up some minor, local victories here or there, there was no hope of them actually achieving their goals.

Kouka and Methode had both been developed as autonomous weapons that could complete their functions using only their own body and the device they were given; Kouka didn't have the power to change the world. Unlike Snowdrop or Lacia, who had the power to control other machines, Kouka and Methode were incapable of creating a sphere of influence to boost their own powers.

There were no cheaper owners around to give Kouka a problem to solve that was more at her own level. Well, there *was* one candidate, but this boy would never use a Red Box like her to achieve his goals. Kouka had not been blessed with a goal she had any hope of accomplishing.

Kouka looked at the invitation she had just taken from Kengo. She had known it would come, this envelope addressed to her, an hIE. Higgins, the ultra high-performance AI that had developed them, had made them all too unique and powerful in their own ways. It was only natural that each unit's owner would ask about the existence of the other units: "Are there other units like you? What kind of unit is this 'Lacia' you are all named after?"

Since Kouka and the other Lacia-class units first left the MemeFrame Tokyo Research Lab, they had each gathered a wide variety of information and come face-to-face with complex problems. But Higgins' underground containment facility, where they had been created and held before moving to the Research Lab, had been an even narrower and simpler existence than the one they'd had at the lab. From those humble roots, the Lacia-class hIEs had prepared for their ultimate goals by expanding their own fields of reference. Each

new obstacle was treated as a goal to be overcome.

And the very first obstacle any of them had encountered was her own sisters. So, whenever any of the units' owners asked about the other units, there was plenty of information and problem awareness to share, even if they left out any of the classified stuff.

And, once those owners learned about the Lacia sisters, they just couldn't leave them alone, which is why it made sense that Lacia had never told her owner a single thing about the other units. As long as a Lacia-class was able to avoid any unnecessary orders, she could easily control who she would fight and who she would avoid.

Kouka walked the lamp-lit streets; no one who saw her could tell her apart from any other human. If they hid their eye-catching devices and put on some normal clothes, there was no way in the world to tell Lacia-class units apart from humans. They could even perfect their disguise by halting the transmission of the ID signal all hIEs gave off.

Through the function of the device she was linked to, Kouka could calculate the relative threat of any humans or vehicles around her. There wasn't a single person or object around her at that moment that could offer her a threat. But, if she attacked the people in the area, police with a higher threat level would appear. Then, if she attacked them, still stronger SWAT and counter-terrorist teams would come. Nothing up to that point would count as a serious threat to her. But, if she continued to pressure the police after that, contracted PMCs would show up. The first rapid-response attacks wouldn't be able to take her down, but they would lead to main battle tanks and attack helicopters being called in, or maybe the Japanese army would show up.

No matter how powerful Kouka's weaponry or combat prowess were, she couldn't do anything about the fact that she was fighting alone, surrounded by enemies. The other Lacia-class units could create and execute strategies that would be impossible for humans to circumnavigate, but Kouka didn't have that capability.

In other words, to avoid a problem she wouldn't be able to solve, Kouka avoided confrontations with the police and did her best to blend in with human society. Figuring out how to fit into human society had proven to be quite a complicated and multi-faceted problem in itself, though, because human society was massive, complex, and full of inconsistencies. In order to adapt, Kouka had needed to change the framework of her own thoughts, and expand her interpretation of her own basic instinct to become greater than humanity.

Kouka watched humanity with a wide, manufactured smile. Each individual human's capabilities were low, but each had their own specialization, and each had their own problems they were dealing with. In other words, the entire human race was always working as a

massive computation device. Among the treasure trove of solvable problems the humans had, the problems of Kengo Sugiri, who was frequently in contact with Kouka, were issues of inferiority. He felt inferior to Ryo Kaidai's general capabilities, and inferior to Arato Endo's likeability.

The answer to Kengo's problem could also be useful for Kouka, grappling with her inferiority to the other Lacia-class units, or so she believed. She sat down on the edge of a fountain. Using her device's ability, she calculated the capabilities of each person who passed by, then predicted their most likely problem-solving methods based on age and gender. As she considered all this, Kouka knew there simply wasn't time for her to solve Kengo Sugiri's problem.

Whoever had sent the invitation already knew how they wanted to deal with Kouka and her sisters. They would have to know there was a strong possibility that the Lacia-class units would fight each other at the event, so that had to be part of their plan. And, if more than a single one of her sisters combined their efforts to take down Kouka, even running away would be beyond her capabilities.

〈Who is Karea Kasumisaki waiting for?〉 Kouka's transmitter, which had been programmed to pick up transmissions with certain keywords, suddenly relayed a signal. The voice belonged to an adult male. Karea Kasumisaki was a new identity that Kouka had received as payment for helping out during the incident at the airport.

〈She may have met up with someone when she shook us off her tail. I seriously don't think that explosion at the airport was her work alone.〉 The voice matched up to one saved on Kouka's list; it was one of the detectives from the 2nd Cyber Security Department, who had been chasing her for a while. The blame for the explosion of the cargo plane had been shifted off Methode and MemeFrame and dropped right in her lap. Once the police started looking for her, it was only too easy to find her anywhere a security camera could scan her face.

By Kouka's own calculation, it would be impossible for her to completely shake off the police's suspicions. Lacia's help was her lifeline. Just as she had predicted before leaving the research labs, the unsolvable problems blocking her path were looming larger with each passing day.

In the grand scheme of things, Kouka knew she was destined to lose. That made her remaining time more precious as it shrank with each passing moment. With her back up against the wall, she pushed her thought processes down new paths, actively using repeated trial and error to expand her own horizons. So, the human world that had once been worthless to her had transformed into a veritable mountain of precious resources.

Kouka was pushing the limits of her decision-making framework desperately, like the flailings of a person about to drown. If she were to wax poetic like a human, she might call this her golden time.

After Lacia pointed out that the police were continuing to tail them, even when they rode in a car, Arato found he couldn't relax. Ever since the incident at the experimental city, she had been pointing out police tails and surveillance; there were a lot of eyes focused on him. When he thought about it, though, maybe there had always been people watching them. Perhaps Lacia was only informing him now because she finally trusted him with that information.

The party from the invitation was being held at the mansion of Erika Burroughs, the CEO of Fabion MG. It was a ten minute drive from the nearest train station.

Arato had a bad premonition, but he rented an automatic car from Mizunokuchi Station and let it take them up a long and winding road. Word of him totaling a luxury car must have gotten around the rental businesses, as they would no longer let him rent any cars newer than ten years old.

His terminal, which was linked up with the car, notified him that they had arrived at their destination. A heavy wrought-iron gate that looked like something from another era was blocking their path.

On the other side of the gate, a path cut through carefully tended vegetation, heading uphill. Arato could only make out the roof of the mansion beyond the path. After a moment's wait, an hIE in an apron dress that looked like some sort of uniform appeared and pushed open the three meter iron gate.

"She couldn't just automate it?" Arato wondered.

To his surprise, Lacia replied from the driver's seat. "Erika Burroughs is an enthusiast for 21st century culture," she told him. "According to interviews, she wears antique clothing, lives in an antique home, and stays as far away as possible from any modern devices aside from her hIEs."

After the hIE maid saw them off with a polite bow, they continued driving up the path, lined on both sides by beautifully-tended greenery. Iron streetlights shone white light on the path. The inconsistent brightness marked them as being fluorescent lights, rather than more modern illumination material. It almost seemed to Arato that he had stepped into the past as soon as he entered the mansion gate.

Another hIE maid was waiting in front of a concrete facade. "Guest parking is that way," she indicated. It was something that could have been done automatically, if she had just sent the proper

data to the navi computer in the car. But Burroughs apparently wanted to recreate a previous era by limiting automation.

As soon as Arato stepped through the wooden door to the mansion, he saw Erika's hobby displayed everywhere he looked. A huge chandelier hung down over a red-carpeted hallway; all the lights were either LEDs or fluorescent. In one corner of the hall, Arato saw an electrical outlet. His friend Kengo had some of those in his house, since it was too old to fully integrate a wireless electricity system, but in Erika's place it was just another set piece in a house trying to recreate life a century ago. It wasn't that there were no electrical tools or automation at all; everything was just limited to those things that would have been commonly used around the beginning of the 21st century.

A girl with platinum blonde hair and vibrant brown skin walked down the grand staircase at the far end of the entry hall. "Welcome," she said. "The party will be held in the dining room on the right side of the hall, so please head that way."

"I see you brought Lacia with you," said Erica, her classical black dress rustling as she walked. "I'm very glad." Her arms, peeking out of black sleeves, were skeletal, as if she had been through some kind of wasting sickness. However, any image of her as sickly was dashed by her poised walk and regal posture.

Erika was flanked on either side by two hIEs. One, in what Arato took to be Erika's livery, was a slightly androgynous girl, her green hair in a bob cut. Arato recognized her as Yuri, Fabion MG's top model. The hIE next to her didn't draw the eyes quite as well as Yuri did, but she was cutely sensual in her own way. Her black and yellow dress, with its wide open chest, suited her well.

"Thanks for inviting us," Arato said, looking around. "Your house is incredible." Aside from the hIEs, there wasn't a single thing he could see from recent years. It really felt like Erika had turned back the clock.

"This house had quite a bit of money poured into it when it was built during the bubble in 1989. During the long recession at the start of the 21st century, my family picked it up in 2006," Erika explained, continuing to descend the stairs. "I was brought over from England to live here when I was seven years old," she continued. In her house of dolls, only she seemed to give off an almost unnatural feeling of life.

"Wow, so your ancestors were super rich, too?" Arato asked.

Erika fixed him with her clear green eyes and smiled in amusement. "I take it Lacia didn't tell you anything about me, then?" she asked. "Oh, you two are such a pair."

Arato didn't follow what she was saying, and turned to look at Lacia. Since her bodysuit had been destroyed during the last incident,

she had chosen to wear a light blue dress that matched her eyes.

Just like the silent hIEs that flanked Erika, Lacia chose not to speak.

“It’d be rather sad to refer to them as my ‘ancestors,’” Erika said, watching Arato’s reaction closely. “It was my father that purchased this house. The first time I came here was about eighty years ago.”

Considering she looked to be the same age as him, the numbers didn’t add up. “eighty years? Is that some kind of joke?” Arato asked.

“Would you believe me if I told you I was put into a cryogenic sleep to await a cure for a disease that couldn’t be healed at the time?” Erika asked.

Arato’s breath caught in his throat. If it were true, he could only imagine the anxiety and anger she had felt when she awoke to a changed world. He was afraid to answer, but there was a power in Erika’s eyes that wouldn’t allow him to stay silent. “I believe you,” he finally said. “I don’t think you have any reason to lie to a guy like me.”

“You have a kind heart,” she replied. Once she had finished descending to the ground floor, Erika told them to follow her and guided them to the dining hall. She smelled good as she passed by.

Without thinking, Arato asked the flaxen-haired hIE with Erika: “How old is Erika?”

The hIE, who was taller than Arato had first thought, answered with utmost politeness. “Mistress was born in the year 2011, and is 94 years old as of this year.”

This time, Arato was really at a loss for words. He started to see Fabion MG, the company Erika ran, in a whole new light.

The dining room where the party was to take place was about 50—60 meters square, and built with wide glass spaces in the walls and ceiling that let in plenty of light from outside. Arato figured that sort of thing must have been in style when the place was built. It was already night outside, though, so all that was visible through the glass at the moment were the trees of the garden outside, lit by the house lights. There were round tables with food scattered here and there, so it was clear that the event was meant to be a stand-and-chat style dinner party.

“Oh man, how’m I gonna eat all this?” Arato asked.

“How can you be so calm right now?” an exasperated voice growled at him. Ryo Kaidai, Arato’s friend, had also been invited to the party. Maybe because he was wearing a showy designer suit, or because he had improved his poise and manners, Ryo was definitely looking more like a man of high society. Methode, who stood head and shoulders above anyone else there, was at his flank.

Their last parting had been so bitter it had taken Arato time to

work up the courage to reach out to Ryo. But after that day, all of his messages to Ryo had gone unanswered.

“Hey, so you’re here too,” Arato said, trying to keep things casual. “The invitation was from a modeling company, so I figured everyone coming would be related to that.”

“I don’t believe you two have been introduced,” Ryo said, ignoring Arato’s comment. “This is Methode.”

It was Arato’s first time seeing the unit that had destroyed the cargo plane at the airport so clearly. Though she was wearing a business top that didn’t show much skin, her tight skirt couldn’t hide the mechanical legs beneath it. There was nothing mechanical about the elegant way she walked over to him though. He felt tension freeze his body as the mechanical superwoman who could easily tear him limb from limb loomed over him.

“So you’re Lacia’s owner?” she asked. “I’ve heard you’re quite a simpleton.” Methode’s voice was softer than Arato had imagined. Still, gentle voice or not, she was powerful enough to take on both Lacia and Kouka at once if she fought seriously. Just looking at her, it was clear that she was dangerous to anyone who approached her, aside from her owner. Methode had the power to create fear in the hearts of any humans around her.

Lacia stepped gracefully in front of Arato. “I’d prefer it if you didn’t pick fights with my owner,” she said.

“Give it a rest, Methode,” Ryo ordered sharply. “Those two are our enemies.” Ryo’s words shook Arato’s heart far more than the threat to his life Methode represented had.

“Wait, what? Why would you say that?” he asked.

“People have died because of that thing,” Ryo said, jerking his head at Lacia. “But you still can’t leave it alone.”

Arato gritted his teeth against the memories of Watarai’s dead body that came floating up in his mind. Lately, there was more to his nightmares than the explosion from when he was seven.

“Okay, whatever! But explain to me why me just wanting to be by Lacia’s side was enough to get Yuka kidnapped,” Arato snapped.

“Explain to me why, instead of just giving up after he died, you’re here trying to get her away from me, just like he did.”

“Well, you don’t listen to a thing anyone else says, so obviously the only thing that’s going to work is tearing it away from you,” Ryo growled. “Those things shouldn’t be walking around free.”

“That’s not true,” Arato shot back. “Lacia just needs someone who believes in her.”

“You keep telling yourself that,” Ryo said icily. “But this whole thing you’re doing with it is worthless. No, worse than worthless. You keep playing house with it while the whole world burns around you.

Don't you give a shit about the impact your actions are having?"

Perhaps the paths of their lives had split based on the future they each saw. One envisioned light; the other, darkness. And, without time to reconcile their differences before they'd met again, this had become the new shape of their relationship.

Ryo opened his mouth again. "Methodé, I don't care anymore," he said. "Do it."

Arato froze at his words, as Methodé's eyes flashed with orange fire. The next instant, she moved so quickly that she vanished from Arato's view, leaving only an afterimage of her glowing eyes. Methodé's movements far surpassed the ability of human reflexes to follow her motions.

There was a sudden rush of wind and explosive noise.

"Did I make it in time for the party?" a voice asked as a massive blade, glowing crimson, split the air between Ryo and Arato. Wielding it was the red-haired hIE, Kouka. She was wearing a simple dress in place of her red and black bodysuit. Among the 'sisters,' Kouka and Methodé were perhaps the most alike.

One thing that did separate Kouka from Methodé was that the red-haired hIE always seemed to be enjoying herself. "There was nothing about not bringing our devices written on the invitation," Kouka said. "And I don't have your manners, so I don't really know how to act at a party."

Methodé just curved up the corner of her mouth into a smirk. "What a barbaric machine," she commented. "I find it hard to believe we're considered part of the same class."

The carpet of the dining hall hadn't been able to withstand the power of Methodé's movements, and torn free threads puffed like clouds of smoke into the air. A faint burning smell assaulted Arato's nostrils. He had been about to die, even if it was just for an instant, and the thought left him drenched in sweat under his clothing.

"I'm the tool that brings victory in conflict with humans," Kouka said. "So being barbaric helps." She hefted her giant, bladed device. When she shifted her stance, Arato saw that her heel anchors had pierced holes in the ground where she stood.

Just then, as if to overwrite the tense atmosphere the two hIEs had created, music started to play. Rather than the 3D sound Arato was used to, it seemed to be coming from actual stereo speakers somewhere in the room.

A group of four maid and worker hIEs entered, carrying a large rolled-up object between them. They unfurled it, revealing it to be a massive, flat screen that took up one entire wall of the room when it was set up. The room went dark, and the screen lit up. A title, 'Lifestyle,' appeared on the screen.

A movie began to play, with a screen structure like the old-time movies Arato had seen. He recognized the footage as the data taken during the filming where Methode's first attack occurred. There was only rehearsal footage, as the real filming had been completely wrecked, but apparently someone had taken it and obsessively edited it to produce a completed version.

In the edited film, Lacia was not treated as simply a machine that looked human; she was set at the pinnacle of a history of nearly one hundred years, starting in 2009. This was the history of technology, growing closer and closer to humanity as time went on. It started with videos of early bipedal robots: the Japanese Advanced Industrial Science and Technology Lab's HRP-4C, and Boston Dynamics' PETMAN from America. The history of automatic machines invading human society was told using videos of machines that were increasingly indistinguishable from humans. The filming Arato had seen was used during that part of the video. Then the video history headed toward 2051, when the singularity had occurred and AI had surpassed human capabilities.

The evolution of the hIE form was shown in the video. The machinery looked progressively more human, along with the behavior and perception, as AI surpassed human thought. Somewhere along the way, artificial life crossed over into the tree of evolution. The shining lines of evolution, traced through the video, flew in straight from the past and formed the words 'form' and 'perception.' Next, hundreds of images appeared on a new axis. Within each image, someone could be seen: fairy tale heroes; mecha; magical girls; high school students, some fictional, some real. A line of light connected the words 'form' and 'perception' and created a new word: 'character.'

Images of reality, history, and the progress of human lifestyle support, mixed with images of AIs that had already evolved beyond human understanding, as well as images of pure fantasy, pulsed together on the screen. A caption read, 'The Human World.' It expanded on the screen before melting away.

Then, as the beat faded from the music, Lacia's image appeared on screen again, along with the title 'Boy Meets Girl.' With her smiling in the background, the video showed everyday scenes with Lacia; they were indistinguishable from life with a human girl. For Arato, after confessing his love for her, the happy scenes sent a stab of sorrow through his heart.

The movie came to an end.

Arato couldn't understand what Erika wanted to say by showing them that video. But he did feel a strong will to challenge modern society in it. Erika obviously had a message she wanted to get across, if she had created a video that would anger many people as their

society was eroded by automation.

“What did you think?” Erika asked. “This is Fabion MG’s new concept: ‘Boy Meets Girl.’ We want to tell the world it’s okay for humans and hIEs to have life-long relationships.” Her black dress reflected the light from the screen where the movie had ended. Though her face was youthful, there was something very mature in her guarded gaze.

The lights were still low, and Ryo’s voice was the first to ring out through the darkness. “You’re going to make Fabion MG and anywhere that shows this a target for Antibody Network terrorist attacks.”

Erika’s voice was cool and husky, not wavering an inch. “That could happen,” she admitted. “But it also might not. We’ll see when we broadcast this to the public this year.”

“Hey, wait, I never gave you permission to use that footage!” Arato said, also raising his voice. He didn’t really understand the whole thing, but it seemed to him that the whole root of why Lacia was in danger at that moment had been shown in the video, and it sent a shiver of fear through him.

“You wish to continue your life with Lacia, that machine by your side, correct?” Erika asked. “If we remove the shame in such a lifestyle, you should be able to face society unafraid. This is necessary, especially if you intend to head into the future hand-in-hand with her.” There was a strange pressure behind the words as they fell from the mouth of the hostess of that dollhouse.

“Stop using our relationship for your plans,” Arato growled. “We’re not going to fight your battles for you.” During the spring, Arato had come face-to-face with the incredible evil of terrorism. He *had* to stop Erika from shoving Lacia and him in the path of any more danger.

“You’re making it sound like a much bigger deal than it is,” Erika argued back. “People always say you can see huge changes in society over the course of one hundred years, but that’s just an illusion. Look at me; I was in cryo sleep for eighty years, but here I am running a modern company. The interactions between hIE and society will change just as easily, and everyone will get used to it more quickly than you might imagine.” The sense of incongruity twisting at Arato’s gut squeezed even harder at her words.

“Erika Burroughs was born in 2011,” Lacia whispered in his ear. “In 2027, she was the test subject of newly-developed cryogenic preservation technology. She was suffering from a disease that was incurable at the time, and had no other options for survival. To her, the world of nearly a hundred years ago is a close childhood memory.”

Erika turned her smile on them, as if she had heard Lacia's whispers. "I slept for 77 years," she said. "When I awoke, they healed my disease, yes, but at the same time, everyone I knew — all my friends and my family — had passed away, and everything had changed. But adjusting to a new world and protecting the things that are truly precious to you are a great deal easier to do than you seem to think."

The mansion was full of items from the dawn of the 21st century. It was a slice of the old world, a world known only to this girl who had been flung through time into her own future. Her looks were delicate but, to Arato, she was more of a witch than a sleeping beauty.

Asuna Kisaragi, Lacia's manager at Fabion MG, had described Erika as being a unique boss. Obviously, she was the 22nd century as viewed through the eyes of someone born one hundred years prior, which created a gap between Arato's perception of the present and her own.

"In human society, we can still connect and use items made one hundred years ago. Doesn't there seem to be something odd about a system like that? It is exactly that oddness in our society that leaves an opening for analog hacking to happen," Erika said. "Even when I was a child, there were people who danced to the tunes of fictional characters, an early kind of analog hacking. From the very dawn of human society, we've allowed ourselves to be guided by the characters people play, or fabricated deities, rather than actual information."

Yuri, one of Erika's dolls and also Fabion MG's top model, was acting as a perfect maid today. She appeared at Arato's elbow to refresh his drink. At that moment, she lacked the presence she normally had when she was inspiring girls as Fabion's vanguard. 'Yuri the model' was nothing but a fictional character, programmed into an hIE's behavioral control cloud. Arato, and everyone else who watched the model's shows, were simply seeing the illusion of a girl named Yuri.

Ryo spoke, and Arato got the feeling he was seeing something that Arato couldn't comprehend.

"Cut the bullshit," Ryo said. "Human society has only gotten to the point where it works better without humans within the last few decades. Things may have been the same since the beginning of society, but they're changing now. The problem is with hIEs specifically, so don't try to shift the conversation to analog hacking."

Arato looked around in frustration for anyone who would take his side. He realized in horror that, aside from Erika, Ryo, and himself, everyone else in the room was an hIE, and he had a nasty flashback to the zombie attack.

Lacia and the other hIEs had human forms, but they were not

humans. Yet there, at the party, real humans and machines that had no real need to wear human forms were mixed together, as though they were all the same. As soon as Arato realized it, he couldn't shake the strange feeling that he was witnessing a preview of the end of humanity. Though they weren't berserkers, he was once again surrounded by zombies.

"Do you really think so?" Erika asked Ryo. "One hundred years ago, before I went to sleep, society had already finished its preparations to change. The characters I used in that video just now were from the beginning of the 21st century."

To Arato, there seemed to be a deep connection between the calm city of zombies left behind after Snowdrop's departure and Fabion MG. And it was all also linked to analog hacking. *It's probably also connected to me taking that hIE kid by the hand in the mall*, Arato thought. *And how things ended up between Ryo and me there.*

The 'system' of human society was so open that it allowed for people from one hundred years ago and machines to integrate easily within it, and yet, it was also the only place within which humans had to exist.

"Fine, I got it," Ryo spat, his voice full of frustration and disgust. "You want to change the world with the power of five hIEs. Do you seriously think it's all right to just change the world like that? Setting aside how childish this all is, the bottom line is that you and Arato are playing around with toys more dangerous than either of you seem to understand."

And, again, Methode vanished from Ryo's side. In the same instant, a flash exploded directly in front of Erika. As the light burned away the darkness of the room, Arato saw what had happened clearly for the blink of an eye.

The flaxen-haired hIE who had been flanking Erika had somehow moved herself quickly enough to protect her owner from Methode, her eyes shining with golden light. Methode, who had been thrown from near the wall to the middle of the dining hall, twisted the corner of her mouth in a smirk. "Saturnus!" she yelled.

In her yellow uniform, the hIE cast her eyes down and bowed gracefully. "It is a pleasure to meet you," she said politely. "I am Type-003, Mariage."

At that moment, Arato realized one of the things that Ryo must have noticed earlier: Erika was also the owner of a Lacia-class unit. That must have been why she had called them all there.

Then, with a few words, Erika stopped everyone at the party in their tracks. "I recommend you calm yourselves," she advised them. "Each and every hIE you see here has been equipped with an explosive device."

Arato felt a thrill of fear run up his spine, and he looked around frantically. Waiter and maid hIEs had stopped all around him. From what he could see, it seemed that they had been purposefully positioned to ensure maximum reach and power for their explosives.

Kouka was the first to put both of her hands up. "All right, you got me," she said. "I can't detect any explosives, but I'm sure *you* could make some that would avoid my detection." Mariage's smile said Kouka was correct.

Only one hIE, Methode, kept moving toward Erika and her guard as they stood in front of the screen. "I've always been curious," she said. "Which of us Lacia-class units is the most perfect? Which of us is the ultimate tool?"

Mariage spoke with a level of politeness that matched well with her uniform. "I am able to protect my owner under these circumstances," she said. "But, I am afraid the same could not be said of you."

Ryo must have already come to an agreement with Methode as he didn't seem phased. "You're bluffing," he said. "You don't even have your device."

"With all due respect, sir," Mariage said, "a tool that aspires to the ultimate level of versatility should not need to rely on her device at all times."

The next one to open her mouth wasn't Mariage, but Erika. "What will you do, Arato?" she asked. "Do you intend to join this fight?"

Arato couldn't keep up with what was happening, so his reaction came too slow. Until Ryo had shown up, he had honestly believed that he was going to a normal Fabion MG party. But now, Methode and Kouka were there, along with the fifth Lacia-class unit, who hadn't shown her face before that evening.

"What are you even trying to do here, Erika?" Arato asked, desperately trying to wrap his head around it. "I don't think you called us here just to have us fight. And for a self-introduction, this is a little much."

He was sure Mariage had all sorts of ways she could attack that they knew nothing about. Obviously, Erika had tracked their movements to the point where she could get those invitations to them, so if her plan was to drag them all out there into a trap, it would have been much simpler to take them out individually. The only thing Arato could think to do for this girl, who had seen a previous age with her own eyes, was to reach out his hand.

Erika made a satisfied sound. "You're quite the interesting person," she said.

A new video began to play on the screen behind her. This time, the images on the screen made even Ryo catch his breath. In the

video, the image zoomed in on a figure sitting with the city lights behind them. It was a little girl with emerald eyes wearing a white dress; the only one of the five Lacia-class units not at the party.

It was Snowdrop, the little girl who caused machines around her to go crazy and opened the door to a nightmarish world. She was outside, somewhere she could see the night-dark ocean. She was sitting on the giant metal skeleton of a building.

“That’s a transformer substation,” Ryo said.

“Correct,” Erika replied with a smile.

There were structures with steel skeletons all around Snowdrop, with electrical wires strung between them that had become a rarity to see those days. In cities, the electrical lines had all moved underground. But, due to the cost of installation, the wires around transformer substations were still above ground.

In the video, Snowdrop was having her flowers bloom all over the giant energy storage batteries at the substation. She was attempting to devour a facility that would easily shock any living thing that touched it to death.

Erika moved with casual steps out from in front of the screen. “She’s attempting to force an evolutionary path that no longer requires humans,” she explained. “Right now, she’s constantly starving for more energy and greater processing power.”

To Arato and Ryo, Snowdrop was even more terrifying than Erika was describing. This was the machine that had killed Watarai. She had human blood on her hands.

“Where is she?” Ryo demanded.

“You’d never reach her in time to stop this,” Erika said. “But I’ll have Mariage pass you the data she’s gathered on her as a party favor when you leave.”

“She’s *eating the infrastructure of our city!*” Ryo shouted. “How can you be so calm about this?”

In the video, massive sparks had started to fly. Snowdrop had either touched something she shouldn’t have, or had dealt some kind of irreparable damage to the substation, but for whatever reason, all the lights around the place flickered out. The city lights that had provided a backdrop for Snowdrop in the video went dark, as if a giant eye of light had closed all over the city. As the power shut off, darkness descended on the city as if to swallow it whole. Slowly, energy began to flow in from other substations, and the lights started to flicker back on.

Arato’s world was reaching the pinnacle of automation. Although there were some countermeasures in place for temporary power outages, a complete loss of power would mean a loss of all the vital functions that kept human society running. This was something Arato

had learned when he was still in grade school, so even he understood the impact of what Snowdrop was doing. He felt all the blood draining from his face. It was like watching the world end.

Only Erika seemed to be laughing at Arato and Ryo's dismay, as if it all had nothing to do with her. "You said the world couldn't be changed with just five hIEs, correct?" she asked. "Well, having seen what the products of MemeFrame's Higgins are capable of, honestly, my bet is on change."

The screen, which had previously shown the history of hIEs and AIs, was again showing Lacia. But this time, it wasn't just her. Arato didn't know where the videos were coming from, but Kouka, the 'tool that ensures victory in conflict against humans,' Snowdrop, the 'tool humans outsourced evolution to,' Methode, the 'tool that extends humanity' and Mariage were all being shown in real time.

"Was there ever a reason Higgins' daughters had to face each other in secret, in the twilight?" Erika asked.

Arato started to respond that of course there was, but it caught in his throat. He finally understood Erika's insanity. Even Ginga Watarai had worked to avoid the social chaos that would happen if the existence of the Red Box girls was revealed, but Erika was different. Somewhere very fundamental, she was looking at the world from a different angle than Arato and Ryo were.

Obviously, if he had noticed it, Ryo had as well. "What are you trying to do? If society learns about the Red Boxes, the folks in charge of all the ultra high-performance AIs are going to want to take control of them. You'll lose your Red Box too," he said.

Erika just smiled. "If MemeFrame admitted to letting the Lacia-class units out publicly, they'd have to take responsibility for the huge amount of damages the girls have incurred," she said. "That's why they tried to collect the girls in secret. Am I right? But it would be a shame if we humans didn't give such amazing girls a proper stage to dance on." Coming from the girl who had just pointed out how odd human society was, this sounded terrifyingly shady to Arato. The scale of the fight she seemed to be wanting made his hair stand on end.

"These girls are our tickets to the future," Erika continued. "So we should use them with all the grandeur they deserve and, through them, open the gates to the future we're wishing for in style."

The relationships between each hIE and owner that had developed over the course of their journey were too different. It wasn't just Arato and Lacia; each pair of owner and hIE had met under different circumstances, and each pair was probably aiming for a different goal.

Arato glanced at Lacia's face. She never had anything to say to him at desperate times like this, but he felt something warm in his hand. It was Lacia's hand. After his confession, something had

changed in their relationship.

“What even is the ‘future’ to machines like us?” The voice that asked the question was quiet, almost a whisper, and lacking in emotion. But, for some reason, it resounded in Arato’s ears. It came from Kouka, who stood shrouded in shadow. As an hIE, she saw a different world from them. The gap in her perception was different even from the gap between Erika and Arato.

But the voice of a machine from the darkness couldn’t reach Erika, who was bathing in the light. “As owners, we are contracted to use these girls properly,” she said. “Is there anything wrong with bringing them into the public eye, even if we would be dancing to Higgins’ tune?”

Arato trembled. He felt like he was standing at the epicenter of a blast that would shake the world.

Erika opened her mouth one more time, and spoke words that were a new step forward for humans and machines wearing human skins. “Isn’t it wonderful, everyone? Right now, we’re standing at the gates to the future.”

Arato was certain she was right. It was a day that would change the world.



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Beatless: Volume 1

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